The View From Here

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The View From Here

by docsxconverse

Summary

Will tipped his head back slightly as he barked out a laugh, and James was entranced, watching as the sunlight caught in his hair like gold thread woven through silk.

The Window Seat

Chapter Summary

Songs:

I: 'Destroy Myself Just For You' - Montell Fish
II: 'Stalkers Tango' - Autoheart
III: '(Putting a Spin on) Never Ever Getting Rid of Me' - Egg

Chapter Notes

Greetings Will and Jim enjoyers.

Firstly, it goes without saying that this is NOT a representation of the real life personalities of these people. These men are merely characters in this story.

So, you clicked on this fic, huh? Even after reading the tags? Brave. Good for you.

This is my third Will and Jim fanfiction, and I'm hoping for it to be my best so far. A little bit about me- I'm actually studying Creative Writing as a University degree, so this process is predominantly also me learning to write, as it has been a lifelong passion of mine.

Coincidentally, I also enjoy reading fanfiction.

I combined the two, I suppose.

Anyway, at the end of each chapter I will leave a note of a few things that I added to the story and why, to all those people who enjoy analysis. At the start of each chapter, I will also add a song (per part) which best matches to the overall vibe.

I hope you enjoy. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I

The flat buzzed with the low hum of stillness. Not silence- *stillness* . Like the air had weight. Like it had settled and decided to stay.

James sat cross-legged on his windowsill, half-dressed and half-interested. Like he'd grown there. His socked feet curled against the radiator, the warmth prickling his skin. If he listened hard enough, he could just about make out the distant hum of the boiler. He had a tea cooling in one hand, eyes skimming the same three metres of street he'd been watching for the last forty-seven minutes.

It was a dead Tuesday. Tuesdays always were. Mondays had leftover chaos. Wednesdays were smug with midweek purpose. But Tuesdays? Tuesdays were aimless. Forgotten.

He sipped. Grimaced. The tea was crap. Jasmine, or something equally stupid. Some girl he'd matched with once said it made her "feel emotionally grounded." She also said she loved crystals and didn't believe in therapy. The tea tasted like moss and daddy issues. He pretended it calmed him. It didn't. Nothing did. Jasmine was stupid, but it looked aesthetic, and sometimes he liked lying to himself.

He hadn't spoken all day. Not out loud. He liked it that way, like his voice had given up a little. Outside, the sky was too pale. The buildings across from him stood grey and blank and windowed. Most of them held a life- lights on, some off. Curtains drawn, some open. Mundane secrets, sealed tight. No-one interesting. He watched anyway.

His gaze drifted downward. Same routine, different day. The courtyard. The bench. The smoker from floor two lighting her fifth cigarette like she was *auditioning* for lung cancer. He rolled his eyes.

"Julia," he muttered. That's what he called her. It probably wasn't her name. He didn't care. She looked like a Julia- specifically, the kind who would ghost you after three dates and still text you six months later to say she'd 'just been busy.' James gave them all names. Names made them smaller. Easier. Less real. He absentmindedly ran a gentle finger along his teacup, relishing in the soft burn.

He catalogued the usuals. *Julia* the smoker. *Mr. Jog* from 4A who ran endlessly every day as if he had a friend who lived miles away begging for his company. *Glarey Mary* - some old bat who watched everyone like they owed her money- maybe she was buying drugs from Julia the smoker. The world outside was a carousel of forgettable people living forgettable lives. And he was watching from above like God.

James blinked slowly, like time was a mere concept. He could see his own faint reflection in the window. Pale. Smudged. The kind of face you'd forget in a crowd but wouldn't want to meet in a dark alley. There was something not-quite-right about his eyes in the glass. Like they didn't match. Like they weren't entirely… his.

His feathered hair spiked in many directions, dark strands seemingly trying to escape his head at the root- pointing here and there, but equally as gathered in a wolf-like shape which bowed at the nape of his neck.

He tipped the mug to his lips again and didn't drink; just felt the cold ceramic press to his tender pink lips as a smooth and consistent surface. From behind, his flat appeared untouched. Everything in its place. Minimalist. Clinical. Aesthetically curated enough to trick himself into being clean. Organised. Controlled.

And he *was* , technically. But the kind of control that comes from hiding something sharp in the back of a drawer and checking every day to make sure it's still there.

He scratched his wrist absently, nails dragging red marks over skin already pasty. He liked the sting. Not in a weird way, just in a *human* way. He liked to remind himself that he was still human, still there. Still watching. Still waiting.

He blinked, sighed, checked his phone. No notifications. Shocking. He'd muted everyone months ago but still checked compulsively, as if someone interesting might slip through the filter. Realistically, he knew it wouldn't be long before he lost everyone. Maybe he already had.

His eyes raised again, narrowing at the flat opposite. The empty window. That *unforgivingly* blank space. It *shouldn't* be empty. It had been empty for too long. It made the street look unbalanced, like fresh fruit in the wrong season.

Directly opposite. The perfect view. Wasted for weeks on *nothing* .

Someone *had* to move in eventually.

Someone would. And when they did-

James leaned his head back against the wall and smiled. Not happy. Not hopeful. Just… aware. Like the smile a priest gives right before shutting the confessional door.

He used to fantasize about who might move in. Artist. Model. Quiet librarian type who wears oversized sweaters and believes in astrology. Maybe someone broken enough to match him. Someone who'd look out the window and catch his eye at just the right angle and-

No. That was too much. He took another sip. The tea had cooled, but he didn't care. There was something comforting in repetition. No chaos, no noise. Just the quiet arrogance of a man who thought he was better than everyone else because he *watched* them.

Because James didn't really do people. Not unless he was bored. Or curious. Or in the mood to play. But today? Today he was bored *and* curious. Which was dangerous. So very, very dangerous.

Instinctively, his eyes fell straight back onto that empty flat. The window across from him wasn't just a window. It was a frame. James stared at it the way people stare at art they don't understand but pretend to. His fingers twitched around the mug like they yearned to draw something. To sketch the shapes in charcoal, smudge the edges until it looks haunted.

He titled his head, eyes tracking the lines of the empty room like they meant something. The high ceiling, the bare walls, that sliver of hallway you could just barely see from his angle- sharp and shadowed and waiting. The lights were off. Curtains open. All it needed was someone to walk onto the stage.

James leaned forward slightly. Not enough to be obvious. Just enough to *feel* it. He liked to imagine the stories. A couple, freshly broken. A student, running from debt. A man who didn't know he was already being watched. It all could happen. He'd built a dozen versions of whoever would live there. Tried them on like outfits. None had fit right. None had lasted. The flat stayed empty.

The emptiness was starting to irritate him. It made him feel unfinished, like he was being kept on pause by something outside of himself, and he hated that. James didn't like waiting. Unpredictability. Lack of control. Not very sexy.

But this? This was randomness. Unfilled space. Blank canvas. That was *disrespectful* .

He let his gaze roam across the frame of the window- the white mottled plastic. His eyes dragged slowly along the edge like fingers along a collarbone. The light shifting through the glass made the room look faintly underwater- blurred and gentle. Like something dreaming of being touched. It was beautiful in the most unbearable way.

All that beauty, all that potential, all that possibility- wasted.

Nobody was performing. It made the hairs on his arms tremble; stand up alert. The suspense. When would the curtain lift once again? His cat purred from a cat tree nearby and he imagined it was the ruckus of impatient screams from an eager audience. It surely wasn't just him who was curious, hadn't his neighbours noticed the empty space?

James tapped his nail against the windowpane, once. It made a small, sharp sound, like something breaking in the distance.

He muttered an amused, almost bitter, “Get on with it.”

Then he sat back again, and waited.

The beep.

Low. Mechanical. Reversing.

James’ head snapped up before he even registered it, body reacting faster than thought. That sound didn’t *belong* to the usual Tuesday. Not here. Not on *his* street.

He rose to his feet, rejecting his place on the barstool and abandoning the kitchen island. His feet carried him; reckless and free, rushed and excited. He came to a halt at his window and stepped closer, ignoring the way his bowl rattled on the island behind having been knocked in his haste.

Down below, crawling into view like a promise-

A van.

Big. White. No markings. The kind of van that could belong to a plumber, a killer, or someone starting over. His black turtleneck was suddenly strangling him, and he was hot- too hot. As if his body was trapped inside a brazen bull and he couldn’t bear the heat any longer. Truthfully, he hadn’t felt such stimulation in a long time.

The back doors opened. A man jumped out. Moved to the side. And there- stacked neatly, labelled in black marker, was a box. He couldn’t quite read the wild scribbles.

James blinked slowly. A moving van. Boxes. *Finally.*

His fingers curled against the windowsill. Not tight. Just… deliberate. He watched the man hoist the first box and disappear into the building opposite. The one with *that* window. His window. The frame. The stage.

His lips parted slightly. Just a breath. Just a pause. He didn’t move. Didn’t flinch. Just *watched* .

This was it.

Someone was moving in. Someone *real* . Someone with a life, with routines, with patterns waiting to be learned and logged and… *understood* . James didn't even realise he was smiling until he caught his reflection again. It wasn't a grin. Not quite. Just a curve at the edge of his mouth like he'd just won a game no one else knew was being played.

He straightened his spine and stepped back from the glass, a little. Enough to blend into shadow if you glanced up. Enough to look like nothing at all.

He didn't want to be seen, not yet. Not until it was worth it. Instead, he waited. Watching that box reappear. Then another. Then- clothes. A plant. Something soft in a crate. Soft meant comfort. Comfort meant staying. Someone was moving in to stay.

James folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the wall beside the window. He didn't blink, barely breathing. Something in his chest felt like a match just waiting for the scratch. No face yet. No name. Just… anticipation. Buzzing beneath his skin like a secret trying to get out. And God, he hoped they took the flat with the window. The one that *faced* him. That looked *right into his world* . It had to be that one. It *had* to be.

The sixth box was smaller. Lighter. *Fragile* - written in a rushed, slanted scrawl across the top like the person packing it hadn't meant for anyone to read it. James noticed the way the man handled it. Careful. Two hands. Slower. He narrowed his eyes.

Something about that felt personal. Not professional. Not 'just a job.' The van man disappeared into the building again, and James started counting- Fifteen seconds. Twenty. Thirty-two. Then- movement.

Not the same man. Someone else. A flicker behind the curtainless glass. Soft. Blurred. Barely a silhouette. James froze.

It wasn't a full figure. Just a hint. A shape, half-obscured, like light shifting underwater. They moved- reached for something just out of view- and vanished again. No face. No details. Not even a clear outline. Gone.

James stared at the space where the figure had been, trying to rewind it in his head like a clip that didn't buffer right. Three seconds. That's all he got. Three seconds of nothing. And it *still* made his pulse jump.

He stepped closer to the glass, then back again, like his body couldn't decide which way to pull. There was something *wrong* about not seeing more. Not in a way he could explain. Not in a way that made sense. But he felt it. The lack. The gap.

A presence with no definition. A stranger with no features. Just the knowledge that *someone* had entered the stage, and the camera hadn't been rolling.

That felt unfair.

He rubbed his thumb across the curve of his wrist, eyes fixed to the window like it might give him another glimpse if he just stared hard enough. Nothing. Only the reflection of his own face now, faint and hollow in the glass. The van was still there. The doors still open. The man still working. But James had stopped watching him. There was someone else now. Someone inside. Someone real. And James hadn't gotten a proper look.

His jaw tightened. Not because he was angry. Because he was *starving* .

He didn't even know what for. A face? A voice? A hint of a smile?

Just something. Anything.

But nothing came. No reappearance. No shadow. No second glance. It was like the figure had never been there at all. But they had. He knew it.

And that made the silence unbearable.

One moment, the room across the street was just that- empty, blank, another forgettable space caught in the frame of James' window like so many others had been before it. A transitory blur of furniture and strangers and nothingness. And then, without warning or sound or spectacle, *he* appeared.

James didn't realise it at first. There was only a flicker of motion at the periphery of his gaze, something shifting just beyond the edges of his focus, as if the apartment itself had inhaled and exhaled *him* . A boy, or a man, really, though there was something boyish in the hesitancy of his movements, crossed the threshold with a box cradled against his chest, held not like luggage, but like something private. Personal. Hands splayed carefully beneath it, fingers curled around the corners, arms straining slightly but with no rush to relieve the weight.

He moved slowly, the kind of slow that wasn't quite caution, but contemplation. His body language was calm, but unsure; like he was still negotiating with the space around him, still asking permission to belong inside it. He set the box down near the wall and rose to stand at his full height, pausing there in the centre of the room. And James watched, from across the street, unblinking and absolutely still, as this stranger- a silhouette only moments ago- took shape inside the frame of the window.

He wasn't remarkable. Not obviously. His clothes were simple. An artichoke green knitted sweater with the sleeves pushed to his elbows. Black, loose jeans with a leather belt at the waist, not stylised but worn from use. His hair looked soft, messy, but an unsatisfied grunt escaped James as the true shape of the stranger's strands were restricted beneath a dark cap. The stranger didn't look at the window. Didn't look *out* at all. Just stood, hands on his hips, eyes skimming the walls around him like he was trying to measure the emotional weight of the air.

James studied him in total silence, gaze tracing every detail like he was afraid they might vanish if he looked away. The frown forming between the man's eyebrows was small, but it deepened the longer he stood there, lips parted slightly, chest rising and falling in the quiet of a place not yet settled. There was something oddly intimate about the sight of it- this quiet

frustration, this unfiltered honesty in posture and poise, as if the man didn't realise he was being watched. As if he *couldn't* be watched.

He bent to open another box and James, against his better judgement, leaned in closer to the window, needing more- just a fraction more. The boy crouched, forearms braced on his thighs as he rummaged through the contents. A stretch of skin flashed above the waistband of his jeans, a smooth curve of lower back that disappeared as quickly as it had been revealed. He withdrew a small stack of books first, hardbacks, the kind that seemed unopened and merely decorative for a coffee table and placed them gently on the windowsill inside the apartment. One after the other. No urgency. No plan.

Then came a photo frame, turned instinctively away from the glass, the image inside not meant for James. That felt like a cruelty. A denial.

Still, he watched.

The man rubbed his palm absently along his sharp jawline, then lifted his cap only for a moment to brush his fingers through his hair before replacing the hat once again. A mullet. Satisfactory. He exhaled through his nose like he was already exhausted and he hadn't even finished unpacking.

And James… didn't move. Couldn't. He stood, spine pressed to the cool wall beside his own window, watching this stranger shape the room into something human, something lived-in. Every gesture felt deliberate and intimate and *undeniably his* , like the whole apartment had been waiting for him to arrive and finish the sentence it had been stuttering through for weeks.

James had no name for him. No voice, no story, no context. But that didn't matter.

Because he was real.

And he was here.

And James knew, with a clarity that made his skin feel too tight, that he would spend the rest of the night- and maybe every night after- trying to learn this man in fragments, piecing him together from stolen glances and silent rituals. Reluctantly, he tore his eyes from the scene. He'd watch again. Just not yet.

II

The coffee shop didn't even look special. It was one of those beige and exposed brick type places with distressed furniture that was probably inexpensive but screamed of luxury which had been worn over time. Edison bulbs hung like lazy nooses over reclaimed wood tables, and a chalkboard menu with aggressively lowercase handwriting made every drink sound like a spell. It was the kind of place James was reluctant to admit that he kind of enjoyed, too many plants adding a tad of colour to the brown palette. It was the people he'd scoff at, all pretending their laptops with assorted stickers made them interesting.

Something had pulled him in- not fate, no. He didn't quite believe in that. He believed in patterns, in watching things enough to anticipate when they'd move again. He believed in timing. And his had always been *excellent* .

He stepped in from the street, blinking against the shift in lighting, the soft static of indie music playing too quietly through dusty speakers. The air smelled of almond milk and cinnamon. Frothed something. Iced something or other. It clung to his clothes. Coated his tongue. He'd liked to have hated it, but weirdly it felt like *him* . It's what he wanted his apartment to smell like, despite the fact he'd never properly learnt how to use a coffee machine nor did he want to invest in a fridge which deposited ice from the door.

He would order the same thing he always did: an iced matcha latte with oat milk. Something about the taste kept him grounded, reminded him he still had a body to return to when his thoughts wandered too far. The barista barely looked at him. She had hair like tinsel and nails like tiny daggers, and James had already decided he didn't like her.

He stepped aside to wait.

And then he saw it.

The back of a head. A shape. A mullet. Familiar.

At first, he thought he was wrong. He had to be wrong. It was the kind of thing his brain might hallucinate, cruelly, like a dream you wake up from too early. He stared for a second too long. Tilted his head like maybe the angle would correct reality. And then the figure turned slightly, just enough for James to catch the side of his profile- the sharp slope of a cheekbone, the way the light kissed the curve of a jaw, the stupid flick of hair behind one ear- and it was him.

His little neighbour in the building opposite, in the flesh.

In this stupid, overpriced, aggressively autonomous coffee shop.

James didn't breathe for a moment, as if the slight kiss of air on that mulleted head would send the other man away. As if his very breath was unworthy. No, he knew his worth. But this man? This man was a mystery, and James wasn't quite ready to overstep the figmental boundary. He'd toe the line, maybe… If he dared to.

He stood frozen, feeling a riot behind his ribs. Heart racing like it was trying to outrun him. There was an itch behind his eyes, like his brain had overloaded just from the proximity.

He hadn't prepared for this. Not like this. Not random. Not unscripted. He'd imagined this meeting a hundred times, each version different. On the street, maybe. Or at the grocer's. Something mundane, but planned. Something he could control. Something where he could rehearse.

But here?

Now?

The man stood at the counter, half-turned, scrolling on his phone while he waited, utterly unaware that across the room, James was having a small, silent breakdown over the shape of his shoulders. James watched every tiny movement. The way Will shifted his weight from one foot to the other. How he held his phone in one hand but tapped against the screen with a thumb that moved slightly too fast, like he was answering someone quickly. Too quickly.

James felt his stomach twist. Who was he talking to? Who was important enough to text back that fast?

The stranger ran a hand through his hair. It looked soft. His neck tensed slightly when the espresso machine behind the counter let out a loud hiss, a sputter of steam and heat that made him jump just a little. Just a twitch, barely noticeable, but James saw it. He memorised it.

The way he blinked once, twice, reset his jaw. The frown he didn't even realise he was wearing. The way his mouth parted like he was about to sigh, but changed his mind halfway through. James wasn't looking anymore, he was absorbing. Feeding.

He moved forward mechanically when the barista asked what he wanted. He gave his order with a tight lip, decently distracted. She asked the question with the monotone of someone who'd said it a hundred times already that morning, "To go or sit in?"

James hesitated. Not because he didn't know the answer- but because in that precise second, something shifted. The air tightened. Thickened. His thoughts, usually sharp and humming, fell into sudden static. He wasn't thinking, no. He was *listening* .

And there it was- cutting through the cafe clatter like a soft note in a discordant symphony. A voice. Casual, quiet, slightly bored, "Sit in, thanks."

Just three words. Nothing special, nothing meaningful. But James' brain caught fire anyway. His eyes flicked up and found the back of the man's neck being served by the second barista. The slope of shoulders, the familiar silhouette. The shape he'd studied through glass- and without thinking, *always without thinking* , James echoed:

"Sit in." He murmured to his barista, almost like an invocation.

The barista blinked, "Sorry, what?"

James tore his eyes from the man being served to his left and coughed awkwardly, “Sit in,” he repeated, louder this time. His voice sounded hollow, like his body was just catching up to what his mind had already decided.

The payment felt automatic. Tap. Receipt. Step aside. But really, he wasn’t moving of his own volition anymore.

The stranger shifted to wait a small distance from the counter. James did too- almost in sync. They stood close now. Close enough for James to smell the faint citrusy edge of whatever detergent clung to Will’s hoodie. Close enough to notice the tiny chip in the edge of his phone case. Close enough to speak, even.

But James didn’t. Not yet.

He watched as the man scrolled again. As his mouth quirked up, just slightly, at something on his screen. James felt his throat tighten. He wanted to ask. He wanted to know. Who had made him smile like that? Whose words got to live inside his head while James watched from the outside?

Jealousy flared like a static charge across his skin, hot and irrational. Stupid. He barely knew this man. But his body didn’t care. His mind had already decided what was important. Precious. His.

The machines hissed, spitting steam like a warning shot. Cups clinked. Someone behind the counter laughed too loud at something unfunny. James didn’t hear any of it, not really. His ears were tuned elsewhere. James could see the reflection of the stranger’s face in the glass pastry case if he tilted his head just right. Not clearly- just the flicker of an expression, a twitch of the mouth. He was beautiful in that unintentional way, like he hadn’t realised yet. Like nobody had told him enough times.

Then-

“Will?” The barista called out, sharp over the noise, “Oat latte for Will!”

The world jolted. James blinked.

Will.

It slid into his mind with an ease that made his chest ache. Four letters. Simple, but now it had a weight. A shape. *Will* . He watches the man- Will- look up, smile a little too politely, and step forward. The kind of practised smile you gave strangers. Unassuming and careful. He took his drink, murmured a thank you, and turned.

James mouthed it once, tasting it like it belonged to him.

“Will.”

Of course it would be something soft. Of course it would be something he could whisper against the skin of his own thoughts like a secret. Will.

He had a name now. That changed everything.

“James?”

The name floated out, barely above the hum of the cafe. He didn’t move. Not because he didn’t hear it- but because he was too deep inside his own mind, drowning in a new vocabulary. *Will* . Will, with the oat latte. Will, with the quiet, restless eyes and the casual shrug. Will, who was right there, standing just ahead, already at the little self-service counter- lid in one hand, sugar packet in the other, head bowed in concentration.

“Oat milk matcha for James?” Louder this time. Sharper. He blinked. Right, that was him.

He stepped forward, muttered something that passed for a thanks, and took the iced drink without even glancing at it. His hands were working from muscle memory, but his focus- his focus was somewhere else entirely. Will had peeled back the lid of his drink and was stirring something in. Cinnamon, maybe. Or nutmeg. Something soft and fragrant.

James drifted over like smoke, placing himself just far enough away to be innocent. Just close enough to fall into orbit. He popped the plastic lid from his own drink, though he didn't really need to. He needed proximity, not sugar.

Will glanced at him. A flick of the eyes, then looked back down.

James tilted his head, affecting the kind of idle, conversational tone that people used when they weren't trying to get under someone's skin and live there forever.

"Didn't take you for an oat drink guy."

Will looked up. His brows were lifted in a curious way, not guarded just yet. James gestured to his cup.

"It was the 'oat latte for Will' that gave it away. Don't worry, not psychic. Just nosy."

A pause. Then- a laugh. Small. Barely more than a breath. But *real* . And James? He nearly swallowed it whole. He cleared his throat again- not awkwardly, no, but like he was debating whether to continue speaking.

"Not to be that guy, but… are you vegan?" He said, easy and casual, the words tasting fake in his mouth. It was the sort of idle small talk he wouldn't usually bother with, but it was absolutely essential that he didn't lose this opportunity.

Will blinked, a little startled that the conversation hadn't ended, "Uh, no. I just prefer the taste."

James gave a small, self-deprecating laugh. “Right, yeah. I tried being vegan once. Eventually caved for a burrito the size of my head.”

Will laughed. And James- he felt it. It was warm and unguarded and better than he could ever have imagined. He wanted to capture the sound, loop it, press it onto vinyl and play it over and over until it was the only thing he could hear. He smiled back, the kind of smile that let you get close. The kind that said, ‘I’m safe. I’m normal. I’m just a guy who also likes oat milk’.

“I never left my oat milk phase though.” He continued, gesturing to his own drink. Will smiled politely, as if he was listening but didn’t know what to say next. But he didn’t walk away.

And James? He stayed. Because now he had his foot in the door. And all he needed was time.

Will stirred his latte with lazy precision, then reached for the cinnamon shaker once again without looking. He gave it a light tap over the cup, shoulders still relaxed, then glanced sideways again- eyes flicking to James’ cup, then his face.

“You one of those matcha people?” He asked, tone light and chin tilting toward the pale green liquid in James’ cup.

“What?” James said, taken aback, not sure whether to be offended or flattered. Will smiled, not big or smug, but a quiet curve of amusement.

“I mean, I could smell it before I even heard your name. Woke drink.”

James snorted too loud, then pressed his lips to his cup to stifle his laughter. It startled something in him- not just the joke, but *that* joke. It was dry, weird, and oddly controversial. It wasn’t the kind of thing people just said- it was quick. It was clever.

He looked at Will properly now, like he was recalibrating. And he was- because this wasn't just a quiet guy with nice hair and polite little manners- he was funny. Something about that made everything worse in the best way possible. James swallowed his grin and raised his cup like a mock toast.

"Guilty, you caught me."

Will raised a brow. "With oat milk too?"

James nodded solemnly. "You started the trend, apparently."

Will chuckled and shook his head, turning back to his drink before putting the lid back on. And James? He didn't move. Because he was impressed, and that was an entirely new problem.

They stood in that too-courteous limbo by the counter, drinks in hand, not quite strangers anymore, but not not strangers either. Will hovered for a moment, eyes flicking around the cafe, scanning for a seat. Not many were free. A couple in the corner were holding hands across a table and a man in a suit was aggressively typing on his laptop like his fingertips were being burnt with each point of contact. James studied Will as his eyes landed on a small table near the back- two chairs, one evidently wobbly leg with how it was a few centimetres off of the ground and setting the chair off-center.

Will took a sip of his coffee and gave a soft, satisfied sigh before moving. He didn't rush. He moved with that same easy kind of rhythm, like he had nowhere urgent to be. Like the world would wait.

James followed, casual, like it was a coincidence. Not closely enough to startle, but just near enough to catch the scent of cinnamon again, and the sound of Will's steps on the polished floor. He was quiet. Confident. Like Will was a pulse he was trying to match.

Will glanced around before choosing the table with the wobbly chair next to the window. And James? James moved. He didn't ask. Didn't hesitate. Just… slid into the seat across from Will, smooth as if it had always been meant for him. Like the chair had his name stitched under the cushion in blood and thread. It wasn't aggressive. But it was deliberate.

There was a small, barely-there pause. A shift in Will's posture, maybe. A flicker of awareness. But no protest. No eyebrow raised. No polite excuse about waiting for someone else. He just let James sit, let the moment stretch and settle like it was normal.

That was all the permission James needed. It was subtle- but to James, it felt monumental. A crack in the door, an invitation dressed up as indifference. He mirrored Will's posture- drink in hand, elbows light on the table. He kept his expression easy, but inside? Inside, he was already slotting Will into place. Already redrawing his mental map to make this table a new landmark.

Already deciding he was never sitting anywhere else ever again.

"You live around here?" He asked, feigning casual interest. Will nodded.

"Just moved in, actually. Like, literally this week."

James tilted his head, "Oh yeah? You like the area?"

Will hesitated. "Too early to tell. Feels quiet. Like there's nowt going on. That's good, I guess."

James nodded, watching the way Will's fingers traced the rim of his cup absentmindedly. Long fingers. A ring on one finger- not indicating any marital status, mind. He had expressive hands. James could already imagine what they'd look like wrapped around a mug on a cold morning, or tangled in bedsheets, or- stop.

He forced his eyes back up, and met Will's gaze for a heartbeat too long.

“You don’t live in this neighbourhood either, though. You’re on the outskirts like me?” Will said, more statement than question. James raised a brow.

“How’d you guess?”

Will grinned. “You’ve got that outsider vibe. Like you’re judging everything quietly.”

James smirked, letting that settle between them like cigarette smoke. “I like to think of it as selectively observant.”

Will chuckled, softer than last time. James wanted to take that sound and hoard it like treasure. He glanced at Will’s phone from where it was discarded on the table. The screen lit up briefly with a notification. James couldn’t see the name, but it made his stomach twist anyway.

“Sorry, “ Will said, following his gaze and turning the device face-down, “ignore that.”

“Didn’t spare a second thought.” James lied, sipping his drink, speaking into the cup. “Curious as to who’s texting you this early, though.”

Will looked at him with a flicker of amusement. “Are you this nosy with everyone you meet?”

James grinned. “Only with interesting people.”

There it was. The line. The flirtation. Just a toe dipped in the water, but Will didn’t push it away. He didn’t pull it closer either, but he smiled, and that was enough. James leaned back slightly in his chair, letting the silence stretch for a moment- not awkward, just enough to let the tension breathe. He watched Will’s face like it was a painting in a museum that he wasn’t supposed to touch. He took in the slope of his nose, the faint shadows beneath his eyes, the softness in the corners of his mouth that suggested he didn’t smile as often as he should.

James wanted to change that. He wanted to be the reason.

“Do you come here a lot?” Will asked suddenly, as if trying to shift the spotlight. James smiled slowly.

“I wouldn’t say that.”

Will looked mildly surprised. “You seem like you belong here.”

James laughed. “I’ll take that as a compliment, even though I’m pretty sure it’s not.”

Will tipped his head back slightly as he barked out a laugh, and James was entranced, watching as the sunlight caught in his hair like gold thread woven through silk. Will’s gaze slid sideways. It wasn’t flirtatious, nor defensive. Just… evaluating. Like he was cataloguing James’ company on some quiet internal clipboard. His glance started at the face- steady, unhurried- then dropped, just for a second, to his iced matcha. Then back up again. It wasn’t long enough to be rude, but long enough to match the drink to the personality- or at least, to attempt to.

But it was long enough to make James feel seen. Really seen. It almost burned.

Will’s expression didn’t shift much, just that same open, observant neutrality. But James felt the weight of it anyway. It felt like his skin got thinner under that gaze. He didn’t dare speak, and neither did Will. Without a word, Will looked away- turned slightly towards his cup, then brought it to his lips again.

James followed suit, like a shadow with a name. His eyes stayed trained on Will’s posture. The angle of his elbow as he drank. The way his lips pressed together around the cup. James mimicked it all. Not on purpose, not exactly. It was like his body had decided to be a clone. He briefly noted how they were the only two in the cafe with cups and not mugs- as if even the staff didn’t want whatever *they* were to happen in their own four walls. James liked how they were different. In his mind, they were already on a different planet.

“You always go to cafes at this time then?” Will asked offhandedly, but the curiosity of the question set James’ brain alight. His smile flicked to life.

“I like the quiet before the lunch rush. People aren’t pretending to be anything yet.”

Will chuckled as he curled his fingers around his cup. “You think people pretend more after noon?”

James tilted his head, watching Will’s lashes and the way his chin dipped as he watched his drink, like it would run away from him. “I think people pretend all the time,” he said smoothly, “some are just better at it when they’re caffeinated.”

Will looked at him then- curious once again, but this time with the edges of a grin tugging at his lips. “So which one are you?” The pretender or the observer?”

James didn’t miss a beat. “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

Will let out a short laugh, shook his head, and turned to stare out the window like he needed the glass to cool him.

For a moment, they sat in a comfortable hush. The ambient clatter of the café filled the air- grinding coffee beans, low conversation, the soft whoosh of milk frothing like background static. Will leaned back slightly, letting the window light catch the edges of his profile. He looked relaxed. Maybe even curious.

“So how many times have you tried veganism and failed?” Will asked, blowing gently on his drink through the gap in the lid. James noted how the conversation was idle, and Will was clinging to any form of information he’d learnt over the past few minutes to sustain speaking to one another. Still, it displayed that he had the *effort* to continue talking, and that was something.

James tilted his head, squinting dramatically at the ceiling like he was counting. “Mmm… three? Four? I lost track after attempting to make cashew cheese and failing. That stuff still haunts me.”

Will huffed. “Wow, a man defeated by nut cheese.”

“Dead and buried. I’ll stick to cow milk cheese.”

Will gave him a playful once over. “So dramatic.”

James sipped his drink, hiding a smirk. “You have no idea.”

Will leaned back in his chair slightly, amused. “I feel like if I looked in your fridge, it’d be oat milk and one rogue avocado.”

“Two.” James corrected without hesitation. He bathed in the fact the conversation was coming easier, like they’d lifted the initial barrier and now rivers of interest could flow through. Will laughed again.

“Oh wow, excuse me.” His eyes lingered on James for a beat longer than before. Still friendly, still casual, but with a flicker of that curious scanning once again. Like he was still trying to figure James out and decode him from scratch. James didn’t move under it. He smiled back, still as a loaded trap.

Will broke eye contact, swirling his coffee absentmindedly, his eyes randomly flicking around the cafe. He caught James’ stare not yet defeated and opened his mouth to speak again. “I don’t really do hot drinks. I’m more of an iced guy, like you.”

James’ pulse skipped, just barely- a slight hitch in his breath. He felt the tiny kinship, the symmetry in their small habits. Infinitely important.

“Iced drinks are better anyway,” James replied, the words slipping out a little too easily. He almost said something else- something that might have given too much away. Something like, ‘exactly! It’s like we’re on the same wavelength!’.

Will smiled faintly, but not disinterested, “Yeah, hot drinks are shite when you’re in a rush too… have to wait for them to cool.”

James wondered briefly if that was a hint- was Will in a rush? Did he want to leave? He watched the way Will’s eyes crinkled, the slight tug of his lips, and decided to dismiss that thought as quickly as it came. James was nothing if not careful.

“Yeah.” A pause. “I don’t really do small talk.” He spoke, testing the waters, seeing whether Will wanted more than just a chat over coffee.

Will held a teasing smile. “Oh, I get it. You’re too deep for small talk, right? You need something with substance.”

“Exactly.” James said, his grin turning a little bit too sly. “I’ll get you thinking about the meaning of the perfect iced drink. Who knows what kind of existential crisis it might trigger?”

Will raised an eyebrow, amused but curious. “Right, so I’m gonna leave this cafe today, wondering if iced coffee is some kind of metaphor for life?”

James paused, letting the words settle between them before leaning in just a little, his voice quieter now with a touch more sincerity. “You never know,” he spoke, almost like a confession, “sometimes it’s the little things that hit the hardest.”

Will was quiet for a moment, staring at James with a slightly more thoughtful look in his eyes. He cocked his head to the side, half smiling. “Huh. You really do know how to make a coffee conversation sound serious, don’t you?”

“Guess I’m a complicated guy.” James said with a wink, letting his voice carry a touch of playful arrogance. Will laughed, rolling his eyes.

“You’re a piece of work, that's for sure.”

That was different. Beyond strangers being polite. That was a joke you’d make with someone you’d passed a few times- or maybe Will was just confident. Either way, James found it delectable. His smirk half-faded when he noticed the lightness of Will’s cup; the way his hand wrapped around it harsher now, as if there was less weight to worry about squeezing. As if his drink was almost gone.

Will glanced at his phone, a flick of the eyes but enough for James to notice. Will clutched the device and clicked on the screen, and it snapped James back into his body like a slap.

“Shit,” Will sighed softly, “I should head out.”

The words landed like a sudden drop in temperature. James didn’t flinch- he *never* flinched- but something in his chest gave a low, pathetic *thud* .

“Oh.” James said, too quickly. Too light. “Got somewhere exciting to be?”

Will smiled as he slid his phone into his pocket. “Not really, just unpacking. Like figuring out where I hid my toothbrush.”

James chuckled, but it was autonomous. His brain was still hung up on the word *out* . On the way Will’s body had shifted- subtly, but unmistakably- into that restless posture of someone preparing to leave. To leave *him* .

He watched as Will stood, collecting his cup like it was nothing. Like this had all just been small talk with some stranger whose name he’d only just learned. James kept his smile on like a mask stapled to his face. “Well, you made my iced matcha ten times more interesting.”

Will laughed, dusting invisible crumbs from his trousers. “Glad I could help. See you around?”

It wasn’t a promise. It wasn’t even a plan. It was a maybe, a nothing, a polite exit. But James still clung to it like a thread. He gave a half-nod, half smirk. “I’ll be haunting this place. You’ll see me whether you want to or not.”

Will grinned- light, friendly, unbothered. “Sounds mildly threatening.”

James' smile twitched. “Only mildly.”

And then Will turned, walking out with that same easy gait that James already recognised. That lazy rhythm of someone not in a rush, not afraid of being watched.

James sat perfectly still, his iced drink sweating between his hands. There it was again. That ugly, gnawing quiet.

He hated it.

He wanted the sound of Will’s laugh again. He wanted his presence. Not just the ghost of him in a cafe chair. Not just a first name and a memory. He wanted *more.*

And already, he knew he’d be back tomorrow. Same time. Just in case.

III

James let the door click shut behind him with a soft finality, the kind of sound that echoed like punctuation. He dropped his keys in the dish by the entrance, peeled his coat from his shoulders and turned into the quiet of his flat like a man sliding back into a second skin. It was dim, the curtains half-drawn, the light outside giving just enough glow to blur the edges of things.

“Otto!” He called, voice low but sing-song in tone. It was the way you might speak to a sleeping lover or a particularly judgemental roommate. There was a shuffle near the window, a flick of a striped tail.

James found the cat perched on the sill, eyes narrowed, ears twitching. His nose was pressed to the glass, watching. Of course.

“You and me both,” James murmured, crossing the room. His hand skimmed along Otto’s spine, scratching the fur between his shoulder blades. The cat purred like an old engine, deep and vibrating. “Can’t stay away huh? I couldn’t if I tried.”

He left Otto there and drifted to the kitchen, pulling the fridge open with a lazy, practised swing. A flicker of cold air hit his face as he gathered cheese, then some crackers from the cupboard. Just a smear of something expensive that he’d bought to look cultured, but never truly treated himself to. He returned to the window with it all balanced precariously in his hands, setting it down with care on the ledge. The cushion there was already dented to the shape of him. Otto twitched his tail but didn’t move.

The flat opposite was still, lit by the lull of golden hour. The curtains were wide open, a silver of possibility.

James reached for his laptop. Sure, it was pathetic, he knew that. But he was nothing if not efficient- or even strategic. All it had taken was a meeting in a cafe, the melody of a name and a half-glance at the name scrawled on the side of Will’s cup. The laptop opened itself, or

so it felt. His hands moved without conscious direction, as though some part of him had been *waiting* for this moment, itching to take the reins.

It was reckless and desperate. And wildly effective. Will. Coffee shop. London. First name.

Instagram came first, nothing too flashy. A public account with 434 followers. The profile picture was cropped too tightly to be useful, but he was tagged. *Oh, he was tagged.* In photos with friends, a night out, a rooftop, a festival- James clicked faster, collecting scraps like a crow building a nest. He scanned faces for context clues, scanned comments for tone- one friend had a profile which was public.

Bingo .

A spotify link on a friend's profile, who was following Will. Will's spotify. James paused, then clicked it open like it was a door to a church. The playlist titles were chaotic, witty, and sometimes sad. A few were aggressive. He played one called 'running' and leaned back into the sill like he was trying to sink through it. It was all there- the moodswings, the softness, the rage, the 2 a.m. vulnerability. It was intimate, more than the smile and laugh seen in the cafe.

James closed his eyes and let the music burn through his ribs. "I'll know you, before you even know me." And got help him, he meant it.

He let the music continue playing as he looked for more. Twitter. A Goodreads account he hadn't updated in six months. James pulled up each one like a file, like evidence laid out for inspection.

"William Lenney." He murmured, the name rolling over his tongue. Otto meowed without looking at him.

"Don't judge me," James scolded, "you sit here and watch all day. You're just not as efficient about it. Because you have paws. Can't operate a laptop, can you, dumbass?"

Movement out of the corner of his eye cut his insults short. James sat up straighter, almost toppling his laptop onto the floor. A blur, first. A shadow. Then, Will, entering his living room with a loose sweater hanging from his shoulders. James felt something in his chest twist and settle. Like hunger, but meaner.

He watched as Will walked to his fridge and bent down. James tilted his head instinctively, following the movement like a hawk. He pulled out a cold bottle. Beer; something like that. Will flicked the cap off and took a sip, and James could just about make out a soft smile on his lips. He narrowed his eyes and leaned forward just slightly. The label? The brand? Too far. Too dim. Just out of view.

“Come on,” He muttered, “don’t make me guess.”

Otto chirped in vague disapproval. James sat back again, clicking through Will’s Instagram. He zoomed in on a photo from last winter- Will in a scarf, smiling like he didn’t know how arresting that expression could be. Another. Candid, probably taken by someone else. The lighting was bad, the angle wasn’t flattering. James stared anyway. Having a public account was an amateur mistake, and the algorithm practically handed it to him. Like fate cosplaying as coincidence. He scrolled through more photos. Will in a pub garden, Will holding a drink with a straw in it, Will in a blurry mirror selfie wearing a shirt that clung too well to his collarbones.

He reopened Twitter, having found Will’s account just as easily. The bio was sarcastic, the banner slightly pixelated. James studied every follow. He started to understand the map of him. He closed the tabs. No, he needed to wait. His fingers hovered over the keyboard, ready to re-open the tabs, ready to send a message. The message box which would blink at him, empty and expectant. It wouldn’t take much, just a comment or a compliment. Something innocent and casual, like ‘cool hoodie, where’s it from?’ or ‘god- your laugh-’.

No.

James clicked his tongue and backed away from the screen like it had teeth. He closed his laptop and let it rest on the floor with a gentle tap. He shook out his hands like they were the problem, like they’d betrayed him by almost typing it.

Otto stirred, venturing onto James' lap with a soft *mrrp* of protest. James stroked him absently. "Yeah, I know. Slippery slope."

Because once he opened that door, once he *spoke* , it would change. It wouldn't be research anymore, nor observation. It would be action- contact, risk. He couldn't risk that, not yet. Not when everything was still so perfectly, no, deliciously, balanced. Will didn't know him. Will wasn't looking for him, and that made everything so much purer. The power of proximity without exposure. He could study and catalogue, worshipping from a distance. There was something sacred in restraint.

James leaned back against the wall, Otto now pressed into his side. The faint, flickering light of Will's television danced in the apartment window. Will was still existing within the frame, so close and in reach yet so devastatingly far.

James swallowed the want. He pressed it down like a bruise under ice.

The sky outside bruised into navy. Streetlights danced into life, puddling yellow onto the pavement. James didn't turn on any lights, he didn't need to. He sat still, perched like a gargoyle on the ledge of his window with Otto curled at his side.

Across the sky, Will moved through his flat in loose, tired motions. He was stripped of the sharpness of daylight and looked softened. Much sleepier, perhaps even more touchable. And then- as if under a spotlight, there was something James had never spotted before. A mirror. Angled just off-centre from the bedroom window. Not enough to see clearly, not really, but enough to catch fragments. James tutted at his two simple windows he had access to- the bedroom, off to the left, and the open-planned living/kitchen space. The windows weren't big, not really, but big enough to see a span of each room- albeit a little less of the bedroom from the angle.

James caught the side of Will's arm as he pulled off his sweater. There was the curve of a bicep as he turned, unaware of what he was offering. There was the crown of his head in the reflection. Only ghosts of motion, glimpsed in slivers, not the whole body. Never the whole body, but just *enough* to make the mind fill in the rest. James leant forward, breath catching at his throat.

His glass was cold in his palm, but his skin buzzed with warmth. The mirror was new. It hadn't been there before- it was angled *perfectly* . Not intentional, no. But fate, maybe. Or indulgence. Or an accident dressed up as temptation. He didn't dare blink, he didn't want to miss anything.

"Thank you." James murmured, so quiet that it was nearly thought. Otto stretched beside him, tail flicking lazily.

The lights in Will's flat clicked off one by one, each a small betrayal. First the kitchen/living room, still half unpacked, littered with unopened tins and thrown-together cushions. Then the bedroom, slow and deliberate. Gone.

James stayed at the window. Otto was still pressed close to his thigh, purring faintly as if lulled by the quiet darkness stretching across the street. James stroked between his ears without looking. He was still watching; waiting.

Even in the dark, the mirror glinted. It had caught his attention earlier, a momentary shimmer when Will moved through the space. Something about its angle- it didn't make sense. It wasn't practical. Not aesthetic. It had been turned toward the window, just slightly. Just enough.

Just enough to *reflect* .

Now, with the lights off and the world across the street reduced to vague shapes and sleepy shadows, the mirror remained- the only thing still visible, the only thing *alive* in the black, reflecting the moonlight.

And then- it moved.

Not the mirror, no. Not the glass. But the space within it. A blur, merely a presence of a barely-there outline of a figure. The figure was standing in the centre of the room, caught not in direct view but in the echo of it. Through the reflection, something shifted. Will wasn't in

bed, he wasn't brushing his teeth. He was *standing* there, in the dark, unmoving. He was facing the mirror. The mirror that was facing the window.

James held his breath, a shallow thing that caught high in his chest. A stillness fell, dense and sticky, like the air had thickened between them. His heart kicked up, nervous and fast, even as his ration mind offered excuses like lifelines. Maybe Will was just thinking, lost in his own world. Maybe he hadn't seen him. Maybe he was just looking at the moon- yes, that was it. The reflection of the moon, hanging pale and soft in the night sky behind James' building.

The angle was right. It *had* to be the moon.

Still, James refused to move. The silence stretched, tight and glinting like piano wire. He watched the faint silhouette in the mirror. It was just a figure, just a shadow. Will wasn't moving towards the mirror, he wasn't stepping back either. Just… there.

Watching. Or not.

James' pulse thundered in his ears. The doubt curled around his ribs and squeezed. Had he been seen? Or was he inserting himself into a moment that never involved him at all? The mirror didn't answer, and neither did Will. There was just the *implication* of a look. The outline of awareness.

"...Oh." James whispered. Otto stirred, but James didn't look down.

Across the street, in the hush of shared shadow, the reflection still stood motionless.

Watching. Or being watched.

Or- God help him- *both* .

Chapter End Notes

Little bits of analysis:

I decided to use the 'window seat' as a metaphor for the physical divide, there is a literal pane of glass between them, but it's also a burning line between watching passively and actively obsessing.

James takes Will's compliancy as an invitation, not an oversight. There's a bit of a twist on consent here which I thought would make it chillingly casual.

James always choses his view, he decides what's worth watching. It's the start of him crafting a version of Will that's his alone. James doesn't talk, he tests.

I mean Will is polite, sure, but he's also distant. He avoids James but humours him, and there's something muted about him where I wanted to force the reader (you!) and James to work together to fill in the blanks.

It's almost as if James believes he deserves access to Will. As if not knowing everything about him is a cruelty. Notice how he composes his own shots, analysing the angles around him, the posture of Will, and the lighting of his surroundings?

I try. Learning to write is a long experience, but I'm glad you're on this journey with me. Comments are welcome!

Watching Him Breathe

Chapter Summary

I: 'Choke - Acoustic' - I DON'T KNOW HOW BUT THEY FOUND ME
II: 'On and On' - Djo
III: 'Borderline' - Tame Impala
IIII: 'Dinosaur' - Soft Launch

Chapter Notes

Chapter 2! This one gets more intense, and we really start to see James begin to fray at the edges. He's obsessed- cruelly so.

We also learn a bit more about how James behaves and why he does. Let me reiterate, this is slow burn! But hopefully the lore is of interest.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I

It started with a flicker of thought. Harmless. A seed of curiosity buried under the weight of silence and shadow.

James sat cross-legged on his bed, Otto curled up beside him like a judge in quiet attendance. The only light in the room was the cold glow of his laptop screen, casting his face in eerie blue. The tabs he had open could've been mistaken for innocent: Amazon, some tech forums, a blog titled 'Top 10 Home Security Cameras for Discreet Monitoring'.

He scrolled slowly, lips parted in faint concentrations. He needed to know specs, resolution, range, motion detection- maybe a tad of night vision, even. A little thrill sparked every time he found something that claimed to be nearly invisible to the naked eye.

His fingers hovered over the trackpad. He clicked. Some were too obvious, some were close to what he wanted but a tad bulky. Oh- but then there it was. Small, sleek- hell, practically *invisible* . 'Perfect for renters' the description said. As if that mattered.

His heart ticked louder in his ears. Not from guilt, no. This wasn't about crossing a line. This was *curiosity.* Observation. Some people paint, some… journal? He just… noticed things.

"It's not like I'm putting it *in* his flat." He muttered, mostly to Otto, who blinked at him with ancient feline judgement.

He added it to his basket. He didn't check the price. He moved his cursor towards 'buy now' and… stopped?

For a moment- just a moment- something inside him stirred. A voice, thing and reedy, like a whisper of breaks before a crash. *What are you doing?*

His hand hovered, the cursor shaking slightly on the screen. He stared. At the price. At the promises of clarity and silence. He could close the tab, delete the history, and forget the

whole thing. It wasn't too late to be the kind of man who simply *wondered* about people, instead of learning the exact angles of their living rooms. His finger tapped the pad nervously. Otto stretched beside him, purring, completely unconcerned now.

James exhaled, shallow and slow. *I'm just a curious man* . As if that made it fine. As if curiosity had never started something monstrous.

He clicked. Purchase confirmed.

The guilt came- but faint, like smoke in a breeze. Otto yawned, unimpressed. James tutted. "You'd understand," he muttered, "We're watchers, you and me."

James leaned back against the headboard, the laptop warming his thighs and his thoughts flickering like static. He felt it- that point of no return. And then he let it pass like it didn't mean anything at all. His head turned to the bedroom window. The curtains were still drawn.

It was midday- and if he really looked, he could see a sliver of light pushing like a stranger's hands at the slight gap between each blackout half of the fabric. The room stayed dim, humming with that strange laptop glow that only comes from isolation and too many unsaid things. James stared at the curtains, a dull thread of regret tugging at the back of his throat. He should let the light in.

Should do a lot of things, really.

Instead, he stood, stretched slowly, and ran a hand down Otto's back like he was grounding himself. The cat leaned into the touch, eyes narrowing in vague approval. At least someone appreciated him.

He glanced back at the laptop, the confirmation email still glowing on the screen. Three to five business days. What's a man to do whilst he waits? His eyes flicked to the curtains again, stifling and heavy. Almost theatrical in their secrecy. The room felt too small, too staged- like he was an actor who'd forgotten his lines, waiting behind a velvet veil for his cue to be creepy.

Maybe, he thought, he should go out. Air himself out like a rug. Something productive. Something innocent. A bookshop? The indie one near the station- the one with dusty shelves and handwritten staff picks, and that creaky floorboard near the nonfiction section- yeah, that one.

He could… browse. Maybe find something vintage, a little technical. A little guide to surveillance techniques from the Cold War or some dusty out-of-print manual written by a man with too many secrets and not enough friends.

He'd look casual, curious. Just a man interested in niche knowledge on a regular Tuesday. And if he happened to look at the reflection of the store window for someone on their way to a particular cafe, then that wasn't a crime.

He found his jacket, shrugged it on, checked his reflection- *barely human, but it'll do* - and grabbed his keys. Otto stayed on the bed, one eye opening just enough to say *pathetic* . James opened the door, paused, and called back softly, "Don't wait up."

The door shut behind him with a click that sounded an awful lot like commitment.

The bell above the door jingled. Of course it did. It had that pathetic kind of charm that tried too hard- twee and clangy and exactly the kind of thing you'd expect from a bookstore that sold more postcards than paperbacks. Still, James ducked inside like he was seeking refuge from a world too loud and a self too feral.

The scent hit him first- old paper, lavender cleaning spray, and a faint undercurrent of cinnamon from the store owner's hot drink on the counter. The kind of place where you're meant to spend hours pretending to read Virginia Woolf whilst actually texting your therapist.

He moved past a display of books with titles like 'How to Be Present and Mindfulness for the Doomed', not sparing them a second glance. He wanted tech. He wanted strategy. He wanted

answers.

The nonfiction aisle curved like a spine along the back wall, warped wood, mismatched labels and a tiny sign that read ‘World History/Other Crimes’. Charming. James ran a finger along the spines, scanning lazily. It would be weird to *rush* . Weird to know *exactly* what you’re looking for.

Eventually he found a book titled with some form of observation-themed pun which was half-covered in dust and featured a grainy photo of a man holding binoculars. He flipped it open. Analog equipment, notes on placement, discussion on ethical grey zones like they were *optional* . It was dated, but promising. Useful, even. He tucked it under his arm and reached for another which held more psychology and less tech, but that might come in handy too. After all, Will wasn’t a cable to be wired. He was a person.

A fascinating, soft-voiced, oat-milk loving person with a stupidly perfect laugh and the kind of hands that looked like they’d be good at both writing and ruining you. James shut the book. Too far. Reel it in.

He felt as if he’d stayed inside the bookstore for too long already. James told himself that as he reached for another book, the third now, maybe forth- he’d lost count. It was some bulky hardcover with the word ‘observation’ embossed like a threat across the spine. He barely skimmed the blurb. He didn’t need to. If it mentioned eyes, behavior, or cameras, it went under his arm like he was building an altar.

His arms were full now, though, stacked books hugged tight to his chest like a papery fortress of intent. Psychology. Technology. Legal loopholes disguised as academic theory. He wasn’t even pretending to browse anymore, just loitering, obsessively combing the shelves like Will’s face might be hidden behind the next dust jacket.

A flicker of awareness stung the back of his neck. He straightened.

The shop was quiet. Too quiet. Just the hiss of a small espresso machine behind the counter and the rustle of a page being turned somewhere in a corner. No one was watching. He was being paranoid. Right?

He glanced at the counter. The girl wasn't even looking at him. Or maybe she *had* been. Maybe she'd seen him pull a book with an odd title surrounding 'monitoring' and watch him clutch it like a Bible. He adjusted the stack in his arms, feigning the casual confidence of someone researching a thesis- not surveillance.

You look insane , a voice in his head whispered. He smiled to himself, just a flash of teeth. Fine, screw it. He didn't care if he looked insane. He was informed and prepared. He slid one more book onto the top of the stack- he couldn't help it, something about the weight of it made him feel steadier.

He forced himself to pause, to look at the covers and the absurd number of them, and acknowledge that he'd crossed a line somewhere between 'mild interest' and 'documentary serial killer'. His fingers hovered like he might return one to the shelf. But which? They all felt vital. Essential. Chosen.

He sighed through his nose. No. It didn't matter how it looked, let them judge.

James approached the counter like a man carrying evidence, not books. The paperbacks were precariously stacked, his fingers gripping the edges so tightly they were turning pale. He then set the hardbacks down gently, like one wrong move would detonate his entire being. The girl behind the counter looked up. Mid-twenties, probably. Pierced eyebrow, chipped back nail polish, an unimpressed expression that could strip paint off a wall. She glanced at the titles, one brow ticking ever so slightly upward.

Her gaze dragged slowly from the books to his face. "Research project?"

James blinked. "Pardon?"

She tapped one of the books with a matte black nail. 'CCTV: Ethics and Application'. Then another, 'Human Behaviour, Catalogued'. Then another, 'Understanding Covert Observation Techniques'.

"Just wondering," she said, voice like sandpaper and suspicion, "if you're working on a dissertation or planning a heist."

He laughed. Too quickly, too loud. It startled even *him.* “Neither,” he said, trying to soften it with a crooked smile, “Just… an interest.”

The girl nodded slowly, like she didn’t believe a single word, but was too tired to argue. “Sure.”

James could feel the heat crawling up the back of his neck. He adjusted his stance and scratched at his wrist. He felt the need to explain. “I’ve always been fascinated by the way people behave when they think they’re alone.” He said, too quickly again. He heard himself. He hated it.

The girl paused while scanning a barcode. “That’s… not unsettling at all.”

His smile twitched. “I mean- observation. Not in a creepy way.”

“You sure? Because you’re *sweating* .”

“I’m warm,” James snapped, a bit too sharp, before catching himself. “Sorry, long walk. And the air in here- it’s dry.”

The scanner beeped. She dragged the books in practiced silence, eyes flicking to him every so often like he might bolt. Or bite. Finally, she handed him the bag. “You want a receipt?”

James hesitated. Yes felt too formal. No felt too evasive. “Sure,” he muttered.

She printed it, folded it once, and slipped it in the bag. “Good luck with… whatever this is.”

He took it with the fakest, tightest smile he’d given in a while. “Thanks.”

James turned on his heel and left like he was escaping a crime scene. The bell above the door jingled behind him, far too bright for the weight in his gut. As he walked down the street, the paper bag clutched to his chest, he glanced once over his shoulder.

She was still watching from the window. He looked away. The cap on his head felt too restrictive- too sweaty. His jacket was tight despite being loose, his jeans clinging to his legs whilst being airy. Oh- he hated this feeling. The city buzzed around him, unbothered and indifferent, but James moved like a shadow stitched too tightly to the pavement. He clenched the paper bag until the thin handles began to tear. He didn't notice.

The books thudded gently against his hip with each step. Surveillance. Behaviour. Patterns Control. The titles felt heavier than the paper they were printed on, like confessions he hadn't noticed yet.

He told himself it was nothing, that it was harmless, that it was anything but obsessive. James passed a group of uni students loitering by a bench, their voices high with caffeine and gossip. One of them laughed so loudly that it cut through the street noise. For a moment, he thought he heard *his* laugh- Will's- but no. No, this one was too high, too sharp, too careless.

Will didn't laugh like that. Will's laughter was quieter, smoother and more thoughtful. Like he'd taken his time to consider whether the joke deserved it. Unless he let out that sharp bark- something that could only be particularly hilarious would bring it out of him.

He crossed the road without looking. A car honked. He barely blinked.

Sunlight hit the buildings like a spotlight, but it was diffused through the curtain of his own drawn mind. It all looked a little blurry, like a dream he didn't want to wake from. Or maybe one he was sinking into. He passed *the* coffee shop and the window caught his reflection. His hair was unbrushed from beneath the cap, his eyes sharp and lips tight. There was something too focused about him, something lean and hungry. He shifted his focus, but his favourite face could not be seen inside the cafe. He looked away quickly, ashamed that he didn't look away faster.

The bag creaked. He pulled it closer to himself like it could warm him. Inside, the books felt like tools. Keys. Weapons. And Will? Will was still an unopened door, a glowing screen in a locked room. A blurred shape behind a curtain. But not for long.

James turned the corner to his street, his apartment two blocks away. He could already picture Otto's ears perking up at the sound of the lock, the soft thump of paws on wood. The curtains would still be drawn. The kettle would still be full. The seat of the window would need to be warmed.

And across the street, framed by brick and blinds and glass- Will's apartment would still be there.

The door behind him clicked with a satisfying finality. James exhaled like he'd been holding his breath the entire walk home. The city was loud, messy, bright- but in here? It was quiet, controlled and predictable. It was *safe* .

He placed the bookstore bag on the dining table and shrugged off his jacket, tossing it with careless precision over the back of a chair. The fabric landed in a perfect slump, like even it knew better than to cause disorder. The table, as always, was clear. It was one of the only places in the apartment that stayed untouched- meant for function, not feeling. He pulled out a chair and sat, sliding the bag of books toward him with quiet reverence. One by one, he placed them on the table, stacking them neatly. He'd chosen well. Or, at least, thoroughly.

Glasses on, spine straight, he opened the first book. The paper was smooth beneath his fingers, the smell of fresh ink grounding him like incense for the devout.

In a way, he was devout. Not to God, no. But to clarity. To knowledge. To control.

He barely made it through the second paragraph before a warm weight pressed against his leg. A soft purring rumble vibrated up his shin. James looked down.

The cat blinked up at him, eyes wide and expectant, tail flicking once like a silent rebuke. James sighed, pushing his glasses up onto his forehead with one hand and reaching down to scratch behind Otto's ears with the other.

"Well," He murmured, his voice low and sardonic, "aren't you needy today?"

Otto meowed in return, louder and more insistent. James smiled and scratched the cat's chin. "You know, this is all very normal. A man reading in his apartment. His cat begging for attention. Nothing odd about that, is there?"

Otto responded by flopping dramatically onto James' foot, stretching long and luxurious like he owned the damn place. James chuckled, just once. "Exactly. Completely ordinary. A man doing some casual research. On… surveillance equipment. To monitor his hot neighbour. Whom he may or may not be stalking online."

Otto stared at him.

James blinked, leaning back in his chair and exhaling, his voice softer now. "Okay, yeah. Maybe we don't say it out loud again."

He looked at the book again, then at the window, then at Otto.

"Still normal." He said firmly. "We're fine."

Otto purred louder, as if agreeing. James stared down at him, lips curling into something between a smile and a sneer.

"Yeah," he mumbled, "at least *you* get it."

II

The park wasn't busy- not yet, not really. That mid-morning lull had settled like dust across the grass, and James had taken up residence on a bench that offered both shade and a view. The kind of spot that said, *I'm minding my business, but I see everything.* He sat with his legs crossed neatly, one ankle resting on his opposite knee, fingers curled around a cold coffee cup like it was anchoring him to the Earth. His other hand tapped a lazy rhythm on his thigh, twitchy and unfocused, his nerves gnawing at themselves beneath the surface. The kind of restlessness that came from too much thinking and not enough saying.

The air had a bite to it- a particular brand of pre-summer indecision. One breeze too cold, the next too warm. James blinked up at the sky like it had wronged him personally. He hadn't come here for anything. Not really. That's what he told himself, anyway.

He was pretending to enjoy the view. Trees just beginning to bloom. A few scattered birds fussing on the path. A toddler screaming at a pigeon like it owed him money. All perfectly normal. All very charming.

He took a sip of his coffee and grimaced. It was bitter, just how he liked it. Maybe he'd meant to punish himself. His gaze wandered, casual on the surface, but anything but. His pupils scanned without really registering- until they caught. Paused. Locked.

There.

A figure, moving fast along the curved edge of the path, weaving through a cluster of slower walkers with ease. A blur of movement framed by sunlight- white t-shirt clinging in all the right places, hair dark with sweat at the nape of the neck, expression tight with focus.

Will.

James' heart tripped over itself. Of course it was Will. He should look away. Shouldn't watch- shouldn't let his gaze follow the bounce of that stride, the twist of his torso as he

dodged a dog, the damp line of sweat along his collar. But he did. He watched it like it was his god-given right. Like the park had built itself around this exact moment. He leaned back slowly, eyes hooded now, trying to look like someone who hadn't just mentally short-circuited. Trying to appear unbothered, neutral, unconnected.

Will didn't see him. Yet.

James was sitting there, clinging to stillness like it might save him. He was too aware of everything- his breath, the shape of his mouth, the angle of his limbs- he rearranged himself on the bench like someone watching might take notes. And then-

Will looked up.

A flicker of motion. A scan of the path. Maybe checking the time, maybe searching for something. Or someone…

Their eyes met.

James stilled. He could feel the thud of his heartbeat in his throat, an echo chamber of *act natural act normal act indifferent* . Will's face cracked into a grin, unforced and familiar. The kind of expression that didn't belong to strangers. James tried not to mirror it.

He failed.

Will slowed his jog and came to a stop a few feet away, chest rising and falling hard, cheeks pink from exertion and sweat catching in the hollows of his collarbone. It should have been disgusting. It's unfair how it wasn't.

Will ran a hand through his damp hair, breath still catching slightly. "Hey," he said, flashing that same, sunny worn-in smile. "Fancy seeing you here."

James tried to smirk, but it faltered halfway through. “Yeah. I… I just like this park.”

Lame. Weak. Try again.

Will didn’t seem to mind. He stepped closer, resting his hands on his hips as he looked around. “Nice spot. Bit of a secret one, this bench.”

James nodded, forcing himself to breathe like a human being. “I like the view.”

Will’s mouth curled, amused. “Of the trees?”

“Sure.” James lied.

Will laughed, short and light, then bent forward slightly, stretching his calves out one at a time. James pretended to take a sip of coffee so he had an excuse to look away. He absolutely did not look away. “Do you run a lot?” He asked, as if he didn’t already know. As if he hadn’t seen the same route traced again and again.

“Trying to get back into it,” Will replied, glancing up from his stretch. “Nowt can stop me now I’ve moved into the new gaff. I just run to feel something.”

James let out a dry, too-quiet laugh. “That’s bleak.”

Will raised an eyebrow, mock offended. “It’s honest. You ever try it? Running?”

“God, no,” James said, shaking his head like he was physically repulsed by the idea. “I don’t run unless something’s chasing me.”

Will snorted. “Even then, I bet you’d try negotiating instead.”

James smirked. “Depends what’s chasing me. Some things are worth getting caught by.”

Will’s eyes flicked to him as he straightened- just a moment- and something passed between them that was too warm to be daylight. He laughed, half-hearted, like he wasn’t sure how to respond, and James knew he’d gone too far. Again.

So he added, quickly, smoothing it over: “like a delivery guy. Or a very determined ice-cream van.”

Will grinned, wiping a bead of sweat from his brow. “Right. Life-or-death situations.”

“Exactly.” James said, voice low and amused. “Priorities.”

Will glanced out to the path, then back at James. “Well, you look very settled there. Like a man with nowt to do, or nowhere to be.”

James shrugged. “That obvious?”

“You give off strong ‘mysterious loner’ vibes.” Will said, hands on his hips again. “Brooding. Staring into the void.”

James tilted his head slightly. “Maybe the void stares first.”

Will’s laugh was short, surprised. “Jesus. That’s intense.”

A small smile slipped onto James’ lips, sipping his coffee with exaggerated innocence. “You brought up the void.”

Will shook his head, a grin still playing at his mouth. “You always talk like that?”

James gave him a deadpanned look. “Like what?”

Will cleared his throat, lowering his voice dramatically. “‘Maybe the void stares first’. You’re like a walking riddle. I never really know what you’re getting at.”

James took a slow sip of his drink, his lips barely curving around his straw. “Maybe I just enjoy being misunderstood. It keeps expectations low.” *Shit.* A bit too honest. A bit too raw, especially to a stranger. Will laughed, brushing invisible dirt from his shorts and squinting at James like he was trying to see through something. His gaze was amused and perhaps mocking.

“Or maybe it’s a tactic. Keep me off balance, charm me into trusting you.”

James leaned in, resting his elbows onto his knees and letting his coffee hang loosely from one hand between his legs. The same playful glint flickered behind his eyes, dangerous if you knew what to look for. “Now why would I need to do that, Will? Unless… you think I’ve got something to hide.”

Will didn’t answer immediately. Instead, he glanced around- casual, easy- and then moved. He sat down on the other end of the bench, a respectable distance away. Not close enough to touch, not close enough to mean anything. But not standing anymore. He tried to play it off by stretching his calves once again.

James noticed. Oh, he noticed.

A shift in dynamic. Subtle, but present. Will had been above him, looking down- smiling, teasing- but now they were level. Side by side. Not facing. Parallel. James felt the meaning of it settle against his skin like static. Maybe it was a power play. Maybe it was trust. Maybe it meant nothing.

Will met his gaze with a smirk, eyebrows raised. “Do you?”

James tilted his head, his voice smooth and soft, a little too pleased with himself. “Wouldn’t it be boring if I didn’t?”

For a beat, the air sat heavy between them, stretched thin by suggestion. Then Will laughed again, but this time quieter. Less certain. Then- he coughed lightly into his elbow. He cleared his throat and glanced sideways, lips twisted in a half-apologetic grin.

“Sorry,” he said, “Forgot my water. Mind if I…?” He nodded at James’ drink, not even waiting for an answer before reaching over. James blinked, caught entirely off guard as Will took his iced coffee and brought it to his lips without ceremony. So characteristically *Will* . He sipped and paused, then made a face.

“Oh my god,” he coughed again, handing it back. “Why is it *that* bitter?”

James took it back, hands ghosting around the spot Will’s fingers had just touched. “It’s just cold brew.”

“It tastes like tree bark.”

James smirked, watching him carefully. “You drank it like you trusted me.”

Will looked back at him, eyes sparkling, head tilting in mock challenge. “Yeah, that was a mistake.”

James chuckled, but there was something darker under it. Something fond and feral. He lifted the cup again, deliberately tilting the straw at a certain angle so his mouth met the same place Will’s had just touched. Near the tip, slightly to the left of the logo on the cup.

“Can’t say I minded.”

And if Will noticed the exactness of that placement, he didn't say. He just shook his head, grinning, looking back out across the park. "Well, we've sat opposite each other in a cafe before. Sharing a straw's hardly scandalous after that."

James' eyebrow quirked. "Is that the metric now? Once you've faced someone over oat milk, it's fair game?"

Will grinned. "I mean, come on. This is technically only the second time we've run into each other, and yet…" He gestured vaguely between them. "Doesn't really feel like we're strangers, does it?" Will leaned back, all casual confidence and sunshine sweat, like he hadn't just set off a nuclear chain reaction inside James' skull.

Doesn't really feel like we're strangers, does it? No. No, it didn't. And that was the problem.

James let those words carve themselves into the inside of his ribcage, branding them into soft tissue like a prayer. Not strangers. *Not strangers* . He replayed it, mentally, like a voice message he'd saved. Like a secret. Like proof.

They weren't strangers. Will said so. Will *felt* so. It wasn't just James, spinning fairy tales in the quiet. It wasn't delusion or projection, it was *mutual recognition* . Will saw him. Will saw him, and he wasn't repulsed. He wasn't backing away. He was sitting beside him, legs stretched out, waiting for James to form some sort of response. Like it wasn't the most intimate thing James had known in months.

James' fingers twitched against the condensation-dampened cup. His thoughts, usually so curated and clinical, felt feral now. Jagged. Tearing down every rational boundary like tissue paper. They weren't strangers, and they *couldn't* be.

He turned, only slightly, just enough to watch the way Will looked out at the trees now like none of this meant anything. As if he hadn't just rewritten the script of James' life in a single breath. James wanted to say something. Anything. But he knew he'd ruin it if he opened his mouth. So he just sat there, sipping cold brew that tasted like victory and bitter rot.

If they weren't strangers, then they were something better. Something worse.

Something *real* .

Will shifted on the bench, glancing sideways. It wasn't a full look, nor a glare, just a flick of the eyes. Like he was checking something peripheral, except James was what sat in the periphery. And Will's gaze lingered, just long enough to catch the stiffness in James' jaw, the death-grip he had on his cup, the way he hadn't blinked in too long.

Will didn't say anything at first. He didn't smile. He didn't tease. He just… saw it.

James felt it. He felt the air change between them, like something had been uncovered, but neither of them was ready to name it. Will went back to looking ahead, but the line of his mouth twitched- tension? Amusement? Knowing?

James shifted too, pretending to adjust the weight in his shoes. Will exhaled through his nose, low and almost imperceptible. Then, just as he reached for his phone in his pocket, his knee nudged James'. Not hard. Not even pointed. Just… present.

Like punctuation. A quiet acknowledgement. And maybe- just maybe- a warning. James blinked, the spell broken for a beat. He let the beads of sweat from his cup wet his hands again, grounding himself. Will didn't look over. He didn't need to. James had been caught, softly, silently, and worst of all- without consequences. For now.

He shifted his grip, readjusted his posture, took a slightly too-long sip of his drink. Anything to distract from the fact that Will's knee had touched his. And stayed. Not pressing. Probably not even deliberate, but undeniably *there.*

James didn't trust himself to look over. He didn't trust his face, or his hands, or the way his lungs suddenly felt too tight, like breathing might *show* something. So he watched a pigeon instead. Fascinating creatures, really. Vermin with wings which will take them exactly where they want to go. Familiar, depending on the lighting.

Next to him, Will tilted his head to one side, phone in hand, scrolling lazily. But James caught the pause. The quick glance. Not at the screen- but at him. Then came the comment. Soft. Offhand. Laced in nonchalance.

"You ever notice how some people read you like a book, even when you think you're still writing the first page?" The northern accent was thick with the statement, as if it took all of his power to form the sentence. James blinked, his stomach dropped. Will didn't look at him, not directly. He just tapped his screen, unfazed. James laughed, but it was hollow and uncertain.

"That sounds like something someone would say if they thought they'd figured me out."

Will shrugged, eyes still on his phone. "I haven't, but I like guessing."

James swallowed, silence stretching between them like a rubber band. It was tense, quiet, waiting to snap. Then Will stood, shoving his device back into the pocket of his shorts. "Anyway," he said, stretching like a cat after a long nap, "I should probably keep moving before I cool down too much."

James managed a nod, polite and robotic. "Yeah, sure. Of course."

But as Will stepped past him, just behind the bench, he leaned in- not enough to be intimate, but close enough to brush air past James' ear.

"You don't hide as well as you think, you know."

He said it like a joke. Smiling. A toothy, playful grin. And then he was walking away, rejoining the path, like it hadn't been a warning wrapped in flirtation, or a knife disguised as kindness. James sat frozen, pulse hammering. He'd been *seen* . He'd been *understood.* And Will hadn't run- ironically. He'd smiled.

James gripped his drink, now lukewarm and forgotten. And for the first time all day, he let himself grin- sharp, private, dangerous.

He wasn’t losing control.

He was being *invited in* .

The apartment was dim. It always was by this time- sun bleeding out behind the skyline, the world softening into a purple hush. James didn’t turn the lights on. He liked the dark. Preferred it, even. Shadows didn’t ask questions.

He sat on the windowsill, legs folded beneath him with Otto stationed nearby, coiled like a sentinel. Occasionally his tail flicked against the wall, but he didn’t meow. He knew this ritual.

James nursed another lukewarm drink, something herbal and bitter. The laptop sat open beside him, casting a faint glow over his lap, illuminating the ridges of his knuckles where his hand gripped the mug too tightly. Across the street, Will’s window flickered gold. Like always, like clockwork.

James didn’t realise he was smiling until Otto’s tail smacked his leg, and he blinked, caught in the soft trance of routine. Of intimacy. Of delusion. The curtain was half-drawn, a lazy sort of carelessness. James could just make out the silhouette of Will moving inside- his shape tall and lithe, hair mussed. He was holding a bottle. Cold beer, James assumed. It usually was. He squinted, angling himself forward.

Another attempt at reading the brand. He couldn’t see it. Too dark, too far. Too fucking frustrating. He pressed his forehead to the glass, signing through his nose- not angry, not yet. Just… inconvenienced. Curious. Needy.

He leaned back and opened Instagram on his laptop without second thought. His fingers moved automatically, like muscle memory. The small comfort of certainty, access and control. Will’s profile loaded slowly. Username. Picture. Bio. All the familiar markers of his digital shrine. Until-

‘This account is private.’

James froze. Not physically nor dramatically- he didn’t gasp or drop the cup. He just… paused. Like something inside him had lagged. He blinked. Blinked again. The screen didn’t change.

“No…” He muttered under his breath, barely audible. His voice sounded foreign. Shaky. He refreshed the page, only to be met with the same thing. He clicked out and opened Facebook.

Inactive.

He tried twitter.

Deactivated.

He searched the Tumblr he’d found through a tagged playlist link a while back. The one he’d only visited once, because it almost felt too intimate, too raw.

Gone. No redirects, no new usernames, no ‘not found’ error. Just *gone* .

His heart didn’t race, not like in the movies. No, this was quieter, a slow, creeping suffocation. The realisation that every open door had just shut, one by one, behind him- and he was left in the hallway.

Why now?

He sat there for a long time, motionless. The air in the room felt too still, like it was watching him. Otto lounged, curling near his thigh. James didn’t flinch, but he reached out, absently stroking the cat’s chin, but his eyes never left the screen.

“Private…” He repeated. He wasn’t quite furious, but the bitterness was rising, like tea steeped too long. It was tannic. Metallic. It curled on his tongue, in his chest- had he slipped? Said too much? No.

…Maybe. Or maybe-

Maybe Will had known this whole time. Maybe that easy laugh in the park was pity. Maybe that straw sip, that teasing line- *we’re not exactly strangers anymore* - was just a kindness before he shut the gates. James shut the laptop.

No- Will didn’t know. It was impossible.

He let the silence wrap around him, tight and comforting. Or perhaps, punishing. He rested his head back against the wall, glancing out the window. Will’s lights were off now. The glow had disappeared while he wasn’t looking. Just a blank square of darkness across the street, nothing to see, nothing to read into. And yet, James stared like there was a message hidden there.

His reflection in the window looked tired. Pale. Eyes ringed in shadow. He exhaled slowly, hand still on Otto’s back.

“It’s fine,” he said, to no one, “he probably just… wanted privacy.”

Otto’s ear twitched.

“It’s not like I’m… doing anything wrong.”

Silence. He looked back to the black window, daring it to move. It didn’t.

“It’s normal,” he said finally, “people follow each other. People watch things. People *look* .”

Otto made a low, dismissive grunt and padded away. James was alone again.

III

It arrived in the afternoon.

Brown cardboard, unmarked. Deceit in the shape of a delivery. James stood over it for a full five minutes before he even reached for the box cutter. Otto sniffed the corner and immediately lost interest, slinking back toward the radiator like the little traitor he was.

The blade slid through tape with a satisfying hiss. The plastic of the package crinkled under James's fingers as he peeled back the tape, the sound unnervingly loud in the quiet of his apartment.

Inside: sleek packaging, dark, minimalist, expensive-looking. He'd paid extra for discretion. High resolution. Night vision. App compatibility.

Of course he had.

James lifted the device from the foam cradle like it was glass. Sacred. The weight of it in his palm made something lurch in his chest- a breath caught somewhere between awe and disgust. He traced the edges of the camera's sleek black body with an almost reverent finger, marveling at the craft of such a tiny device, how technology could be so invisible yet so invasive. It was a phantom in his hand, a ghost waiting to slip into the shadows. The cold metal of the lens caught the light, refracting it like a single unblinking eye, and James felt the thrill of power curl in his stomach. This was no longer about curiosity. It was about control, about rewriting the rules of what was seen and unseen. He imagined the invisible thread stretching between this small eye and the world it was about to watch, how that silent connection would throb with every heartbeat from Will's apartment.

"Okay," he murmured. "You bought it. You opened it. Now… now you do it."

He settled at the dining table, the surface cold beneath his palms as he adjusted his glasses and opened the manual, the pages crisp and fragrant with fresh ink. Each word seemed to

carry weight beyond instruction- like a secret map to new territories of obsession. He read and reread the setup process, fingers trembling slightly, mind racing ahead to the moment the camera would slide into its new home. Around him, the apartment breathed in silence. Otto's paws padded softly against the hardwood floor, a comforting rhythm that grounded James as his thoughts spiraled higher.

He looked up, catching the eyes of his cat who watched him with an inscrutable expression, the quiet judge of his every move. Otto blinked slowly, tail curling with an almost human nod of approval, as if understanding that James was about to cross a line he might never come back from.

But he didn't move. Not yet. He stood in the kitchen, the camera still in his hand, staring at it like it might talk him out of this. He wasn't the kind of man who did things like this. He wasn't-

Yes, he was. He absolutely *was* .

That was the terrifying part. How easy it had become. Its presence alone was enough to make the apartment feel… heavier. The air sat thick, like even Otto knew something had shifted. The cat was staring at him from the windowsill, tail twitching like a metronome of judgment. James zipped his jacket up slowly, shoving the camera into a tote bag and checking the camera inside was still there. Still silent. Still waiting.

"Just reconnaissance," he muttered under his breath, as if saying it aloud made it better. "Just seeing if it fits. No harm in that." His voice did not convince the feline.

The street was quiet. Dull, cloudy light from an indecisive sky. One of those days where the weather couldn't make up its mind between melancholy and menace. James stood across the road from Will's building, partially shielded by the overhang of a newsagent's doorway. He had no reason to be here. Not one. Not unless you counted obsession. Or compulsion. Or the gnawing need to see the plan become real.

He glanced at the time. Will was usually out by now.

As if summoned by the thought, the door to the building opened- and there he was. Will. Grey hoodie. Black joggers. Earbuds in. Head tilted slightly down as he scrolled his phone. He stepped onto the pavement, barely glancing around, before turning left at the corner with the kind of unbothered ease that made James' teeth itch. James watched him go and didn't move until he was well out of sight. And then-

He crossed the road. Fast. Feet silent, breath shallow. The door was slowly swinging closed, like it too hadn't noticed him yet. James slipped forward and caught it with two fingers. A ghost's touch. No sound. And just like that- he was inside. The door closed behind him with a hushed finality. Like the building itself had swallowed him.

James stood in the entryway, still and silent. The kind of silence that screamed. His bag felt heavier now, like the camera inside it knew what was happening. Like it had weight beyond the physical. His breath ghosted the air in front of him, colder in here than outside. Or maybe it was just his nerves. He reached up and adjusted his cap- some barely-there reflex to look less noticeable, despite the fact that there was no one here. No witnesses. Just him and the awful hush of his own heartbeat.

The stairwell stretched ahead, narrow and chipped, its linoleum aged to that specific shade of institutional sadness. And yet… It had windows. Three of them. One on each landing, framing the outside world in dusty rectangles. He'd stood across from this building so many times now, watching from his own windowsill. Observing. Noting. Calculating. He knew where Will's flat was. Not from mailboxes or chance. But by triangulation- by the light, the movement, the way the curtains shifted when Will walked past. He had watched shadows and figured out distances. Counted floors. Counted steps.

And now he climbed them.

Each stair creaked under foot like a moral accusation. First floor. Second. The stairwell windows matched what he'd seen from his apartment- same angles, same view of the tree with the broken limb, the crooked streetlamp. When he reached Will's floor, he slowed. That corner flat. The window with the soft white curtain Will never quite pulled all the way shut. James stared at it now from the stairwell landing, his pulse hammering somewhere behind his teeth. From this angle, it was obvious. From this distance, it was intimate.

This is fine. The lies were easy. They always were, when the compulsion was louder than the conscience. He lingered in the stairwell, fingers gripping the strap of his bag, the camera inside like a talisman. His breath was slow. Controlled. But his eyes? They were locked on that door. Locked on the space that wasn't his, and never would be. Not unless he took it.

James moved like a ghost now- silent, methodical, unnervingly calm. The hallway was still. The type of still that felt suspended, like the building itself was holding its breath, waiting to see what he'd do next. His shoes barely made a sound on the worn floor as he approached the far end of the landing, across from Will's flat.

He glanced once over his shoulder. No one. Of course no one.

He crouched, slowly, precisely- each movement deliberate, rehearsed. This wasn't impulsive. No. He'd thought it through. Mapped it out. This was the perfect spot: a high corner of the stairwell, half-hidden behind the curve of the bannister, angled just right. It would capture Will's door fully- every arrival, every departure. Every pause.

The small camera gleamed in the dim light, new and clinical and so, so out of place in this lived-in building. A predator in a nest. He fitted the mount to the wall, fingers grazing cold plaster. A small click. Then a twist. Another click. For a moment, he stared at it- at what he'd done. The lens faced Will's door. Unblinking. Watching.

A part of him whispered to stop. To rip it down. To walk away and scrub this moment out of his memory like it never happened. But then he pictured it: Will walking up the stairs, keys in hand, eyes soft, face flushed from the cold.

Captured.

Kept.

His.

James reached into his coat pocket and pulled out his phone. He tapped into the camera's live feed. It loaded. The image appeared, clear as glass- Will's door, dead centre. A thrill ran through him so sudden, so sharp it felt like electricity in his veins. He stepped back slowly, letting his eyes flicker from the camera to the door and back again.

It was… seamless.

You wouldn't see it unless you were looking. No wires. No obvious casing. Just a blink of black in the shadowed edge of the stairwell. Nothing you'd notice unless you had a reason to stare. And no one stares at stairwells, do they?

James let out a slow breath, the kind you don't realise you've been holding until your chest starts to ache. A smug sort of satisfaction pooled low in his stomach. The thrill of something forbidden, done flawlessly. No trace. No noise. No witnesses. He tilted his head, watching the way the lens sat flush against the wall. Discreet. Perfect. In plain sight and utterly invisible.

"You'd have to *want* to find it," he murmured, almost fondly. "And you don't know what you're looking for, do you, Will?"

The silence around him felt complicit. Like the walls were holding the secret with him.

God, it was beautiful.

The walk back to his apartment was brisk, deliberate. His heart paced ahead of him, faster than his feet, chest still tight with adrenaline and heat. He shut the door behind him with a soft click, dropped the keys, and made straight for the dining table like he was being pulled.

Phone out. App open. And there it was. A perfect, still frame of the stairwell. Crisp. Quiet. Harmless, if you didn't know better.

James dragged the chair back, sat down, elbows on the table, phone in both hands. His reflection flickered faintly on the screen, the ghost of a grin curling at the corner of his mouth. It wasn't even real-time surveillance- it was better. It was anticipation. He didn't even need sound. He just needed the image. That flat. That door. That clear view of someone else's life.

Minutes passed. Ten. Fifteen. Otto hopped onto the table and James absently stroked him, eyes locked to the screen. His thumb tapped the edge, restless, twitchy. He told himself he wasn't anxious. Then, movement.

Will. Walking into frame, flushed from the wild. Hair slightly tousled. Shopping bag in one hand, his phone in the other. He paused at the door, patting his pockets for keys. James sat forward like a man starved.

The camera caught everything. The angle wasn't perfect, but it was enough. The shift of Will's weight. The curve of his jaw when he smiled at something on his screen. The way he balanced the bag on one hip to fish his keys out. The way his shoulders moved when he finally stepped inside, the door swinging shut behind him.

And then- stillness. James let the silence stretch. Let himself stare. Let the thrill wash over him again, slow and steady, like sinking into warm water.

Then, quietly, like a secret not meant to be heard: "There you are."

He'd become the shadow in the corner of the frame. The pause between footsteps. The breeze that moves the curtain when no windows are open. He wouldn't knock. He wouldn't scream. He would seep- into routine, into habit, into the quiet moments Will never thought twice about. Like fog curling under a door. Like the cold spot in a warm room. He wasn't looking for attention. He was looking for entry.

And now? He'd found it. He stood up with a stretch, joints cracking. The moment was over- filed away, labelled, shelved. No sirens, no guilt. Just the hum of the fridge and the soft padding of sock feet on tile. James opened the fridge. Stared into the cold like he might find salvation tucked behind the oat milk. He grabbed the orange juice. Not fresh-squeezed. Cheap, sharp, full of pulp. Like he liked it.

Back at the table, he poured it into a glass and stirred it absently with the handle of a spoon. As if it mattered. As if there was a ceremony in this. The screen still glowed. Will's door. Closed now. Locked. Lit dimly by the hallway light. So still. So *his* .

The juice glass felt cool and heavy in his hand, condensation beading on the outside like tiny reminders of the cold world beyond his carefully constructed bubble. He brought it to his lips, the tart sweetness mingling with the sharp tang of his racing thoughts. The screen glowed softly in the dim room, a portal to another life- Will's life- that pulsed silently in pixels.

James sipped the juice. "Nothing weird about this," he muttered, to no one in particular.

Otto meowed from his perch on the windowsill, tail twitching like a metronome. James glanced over. "Don't look at me like that. You benefit from this too, you know. Emotional stability. Enrichment."

Another sip. Another quiet second ticked past on the screen. He reached out, scratched under Otto's chin. "It's nice to have hobbies, right?"

The cat purred. The hallway on screen remained silent. James leaned back, eyes fixed on the feed. He was full of juice and delusion. Life was good. It was like watching a candle before it burns—so full of promise, so ready to ruin everything.

IIII

It was the window that did it. Not Will's window, not the one across the street. Not this one with its clean edges and promising view. But the old one- James' first.

The house was thin-walled and mean-spirited, every sound carrying like it had a grudge. James sat on the floor of his bedroom, back against the radiator, knees tucked up tight, the windowsill pressing into his shoulder. The shouts downstairs weren't loud- but they were sharp. Not rage, not anymore. Just a tired, ugly scrape of two people who'd run out of love and hadn't figured out what to do with the silence that followed.

He didn't flinch when they raised their voices. Not now. Not anymore. It was background noise. Like a ticking clock. Like the hum of the fridge. Like disappointment simmering on the hob.

Instead, he stared out of the window. He always did that. Had done for months now. Maybe longer. Out there, the world moved gently. Predictably. A man in a dark coat walking his dog at exactly 7:30. A woman in curlers who opened her curtains the same way each morning, tug-tug-snap. A child bouncing a red ball against the curb, five beats, then catch. Five beats, then catch. He used to want to play with that child, but he never left his room anymore.

It was comfort disguised as surveillance. Or maybe the other way around.

The rhythm of strangers became scripture. A way to keep time. A way to know that despite everything, some things were still reliable. James exhaled through his nose and adjusted the cuff of his sleeve. His fingers were cold. He didn't turn from the window. Not even when the argument turned into silence- because that was worse. That was the moment before the next storm. The inhale before the slap of thunder.

Out there, at least, people moved with purpose. Routine. Dignity. Inside, everything just unravelled. So he watched, because if he couldn't escape it, he could at least choose where to look. The silence didn't last. It never did. It snapped back sharp, like elastic recoiling from a stretch, punctuated by the brittle clatter of something being set down too hard- cutlery,

maybe. Or glass. Then a voice, too tight to be yelling but too loud to be casual. Accusation disguised as conversation. That kind of venom.

James didn't even try to make out the words. He used to, once. Sat with his ear to the door like a fool, thinking that understanding it might somehow soften it. It didn't. All it did was etch the syllables into his skull like graffiti- hard to scrub out, harder to forget. So now he didn't listen to what. He listened to how. The rise and fall of it. The rhythm. Like tracking a storm on the horizon. You don't need to know what it's saying to know when it's getting closer. His gaze drifted back out the window.

Across the street, the same woman with the yellow porch light was watering her plants. Slowly. Precisely. Always starting with the same hanging basket, always working clockwise, like it was a ritual. The dog-walker had already passed by- James had caught him a few minutes earlier- and now the teenager in the grey hoodie was sat on his front step, scrolling on his phone like he did every night, thumbs twitching with mechanical certainty.

At first, it was innocent. Almost sweet. He gave them names. He imagined their voices. He drew them in his notebooks- stick figures at first, then faces. Expressions. Timetables. He got good at knowing things. Who left the house late. Who looked tired. Who was pretending? It wasn't about spying. Not then. It was about understanding. About safety. If he knew what everyone was doing, if he could predict it, then maybe nothing would surprise him again.

He heard the footsteps before the door opened.

Not his mother's- hers were too fast, always angry, always on a mission to prove something. Not his father's either- he walked like the house owed him silence, each step deliberate, full of spite. This was different. Barefoot. Careful. Familiar. James didn't turn, but something in his shoulders loosened. He knew her rhythms. She always paused just outside the door, like she was asking for permission without using words. Then the slow creak, the sigh of hinges. No knock. Never a knock. Too much noise drew attention.

The room was dark except for the blue spill of streetlight through the window. James stayed where he was, perched on the edge of his bed, one knee up, arms wrapped around it, chin tucked low. Watching. Always watching. Behind him, she closed the door with the kind of gentleness that meant she'd done this a thousand nights before.

“You okay?” she asked, voice low in that tone that only an older sister could create. Like even speaking too loud might wake something violent. He shrugged.

She came over anyway, dragging his old quilt off the end of the bed as she moved. Sat beside him without invitation, curling into herself like she belonged there. Like she had every right to his silence. When their arms touched, she didn’t pull away. They stared out the window together. Across the street, nothing was happening. Just the parked cars, a porch light, the empty rectangle of a lit kitchen. Still, James watched. It was better than turning around.

After a few minutes, she asked, “Same guy out walking his dog again?”

James shook his head. “Not tonight.”

She followed his gaze, but there was nothing to see. That didn’t seem to bother her. “They’re still screaming,” she said after a beat. Not a question. Not a surprise. Just a fact.

James kept his eyes on the street. “It’s loud tonight.”

“They were yelling about the cabinet,” she murmured. “You didn’t even do anything.”

“I left it open.”

“It’s a cabinet, James.”

He didn’t answer.

His sister reached across him, snagged the sketchpad off the nightstand. She didn’t ask permission. She didn’t need to. “Still drawing?” she asked, flipping through the pages. He nodded.

“They feel like real people,” she said after a pause. “Not just… shapes. Like you know them.”

“I don’t,” he said. She looked at one of the drawings. A woman adjusting her ponytail in a window. Another of a man half-bent, locking his car.

“No,” she said slowly. “But maybe you wish you did.” She flipped another page. Then another. He could hear her humming- quiet and amused in a way that made him uneasy. Her fingers paused on a sketch he already regretted.

It was of a girl. Not anyone he knew. Just someone he’d seen once- maybe twice- walking by with a tote bag and wild hair that looked like it defied everything the world threw at it. He’d drawn her from memory. Twice. Once smiling, once looking sad. “Ohh,” she said, dragging the sound out like syrup. “Who’s *this* ?”

“No one,” James muttered, turning his face toward the glass. He could feel the heat in his ears.

“Mmm, sure,” she said, smug as anything. “Looks like someone’s got a little window crush.”

He didn’t answer. That only made it worse.

“Oh, come on,” she grinned, nudging his shoulder with hers. “You drew her *twice* , James. She’s practically your girlfriend at this point. Should I be worried? Should we get you a diary and a pen with a fluffy top?”

“It’s not like that.”

“Then what’s it like?”

He didn’t know how to answer. Not really. It wasn’t a crush. Not exactly. It was just… interest. Fascination. Something to hold onto when everything in the house felt too loud or too sharp. She had walked past, once, swinging her arms like the world didn’t owe her fear. He’d watched and felt- calm.

“I like… knowing they’ll be there,” he said finally. “People. Doing the same thing. It’s predictable.”

She tilted her head, studying him. Her teasing faded, gentled into something warmer. “Yeah,” she said, softer now. “I get that.”

James finally glanced at her. Her thumb was still on the edge of the page, her eyes flicking between the drawing and his face. Then she smirked again, because of course she did.

“But seriously, if you ever draw me with a bag of crisps and a greasy bun, I will smother you in your sleep.”

James let out a laugh. Real and sudden. She grinned. “There he is.”

She let the moment hang for a bit, that sibling quiet where neither of them needed to fill the space. Her thumb flicked the corner of the page, slow and idle, like she was pretending not to be as curious as she was. Then she turned the page. The tone shifted instantly.

It wasn’t a girl with a tote bag this time. It wasn’t someone walking confidently down the street. It was something else entirely- scratched lines, heavy pencil strokes that bled deep into the paper. A room, maybe. A window, again. But this time the window was warped, like it was melting. There were eyes drawn in the walls. A figure with no face stood just outside the glass, its fingers pressed against the pane. Like it was trying to get in. She stopped breathing for a second. James could feel it, the pause. That hush of her lungs holding still.

“James…” she said, voice lower now. Careful.

He didn’t answer.

She looked at him, but he didn’t look back. His eyes were on the window, pupils distant, chasing some movement out there that probably wasn’t even real.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

His response was instant, flat, automatic. “You already asked that.”

Her shoulders stiffened. There was no room left for teasing. She didn’t turn another page. He glanced sideways, caught the way her thumb hovered mid-air, not sure what to do next. Not sure whether to push further or pretend like she hadn’t seen anything at all. He could feel the shift in her- how she was recalibrating, just like he always did. Measuring what was safe to say. What wasn’t. What could be left in the dark.

But she said nothing. Just set the sketchbook gently on his desk, like it might break if she made a wrong move. He didn’t thank her for coming. She didn’t offer anything else. The shouting from downstairs didn’t stop. But neither of them looked away from the window.

James didn’t speak nor move. He just watched the reflection of the hallway light in the windowpane, the way it shifted when his sister breathed too loudly. He knew what she thought. What the picture looked like. What it implied. But he wasn’t crazy.

He wasn’t.

He was just… troubled. That’s all. Frayed around the edges, maybe. A little too quiet. A little too observant. But who wasn’t? He liked to think he was self-aware- dangerously so. The kind of awareness that dissected every glance, every word, every flicker of emotion in the people around him. He understood his own mechanisms, could name the gears even as they groaned. He could point to the leak in the boat and say “See? There it is.” before rowing anyway. That wasn’t madness. That was control.

Wasn’t it?

Because he chose to look through the window instead of dealing with the noise. He *chose* to draw instead of scream. That was a decision. A measured, deliberate one. Just because the images on the paper came out a little… intense sometimes, didn’t mean he wasn’t the one holding the pencil. James finally spoke, voice low, barely a whisper.

“You don’t have to worry.”

It wasn’t reassuring. Not really. It sounded too practiced. Too clean. The kind of line you hand to someone so they’ll stop asking questions and start pretending everything’s fine. She glanced up at him again, something uncertain flickering across her expression.

He added, softer, “I wouldn’t let it get that far.”

As if there was a line. As if he could see it. As if he hadn’t already stepped over it and drawn a new one a few feet ahead. But she nodded anyway. Because what else could she do? And James just sat there, fingers pressed into his palm, nails biting skin. Not enough to hurt. Just enough to feel real. Because if he could feel it, he could still pull back. He was in control. Still. Just enough.

The window wasn’t just glass and frame- it was a held breath, a thin veil between chaos and choreography, where the world outside moved in soft, predictable loops while everything inside cracked like ice beneath weight it was never meant to carry.

Chapter End Notes

In this chapter I tried to twist voyeurism into affection so that we start to understand James' delusion, terrifyingly. I mean, the God complex clearly emerges, and James is

convinced he understands Will better than he understands himself.

He observes the micro-behaviours and builds entire narratives from them. You know, like a weirdo. James doesn't want to simply interact with Will directly, no, this would disrupt the fantasy.

He wants to own the version of Will he sees through the screen.

I tried to use breath in this chapter to convey control, dependency, and prescence. It's almost romantic, until to remember James is watching through illegal cameras. Which is, like, crazy.

The silence creates pressure- the lack of Will's voice means James' voice over-fills everything. It becomes madness. He starts projecting his feelings onto Will without any actual input from him. It's sheer fascination. The interaction in the path is somewhat clipped- still that initial politeness. But James speaks in a way which is so characteristically James, for this fic. Weird. Possessive. Technical and careful.

James is fixated, and when the routine snaps, he spirals.

Will he crack under it all?

What He Doesn't See

Chapter Summary

I: 'Figure You Out' - Djo
II: 'Good Looking' - Suki Waterhouse
III: 'Mushroom Cloud' - Tempesst
IIII: 'Experience' - Ludovico Einaudi

Chapter Notes

As you can probably tell, the format will be four parts, I, II, III, and IIII. Chapter one only had three parts for prologue-style reasons. I hope you're enjoying the format.

Writing this is incredibly enjoyable, I'm loving the journey and thank you for joining me on it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I

James had chosen the same seat.

Corner table, by the window. A place that offered enough distance to study the room without seeming part of it. His iced coffee sat untouched, rotting into the wood, a ring forming like a countdown. He told himself he liked the routine- the cafe, the buzz, the way the staff never made small talk (not to him, anyway)- but the truth hummed under the surface like a live wire: he liked being there because Will *might* walk in.

He hadn't initially meant to. It wasn't like it had been marked in his calendar. There was no alert buzzing on his phone which said 'sit in cafe'. But he was there, iced coffee in hand, two full hours before most people even considered debating lunch. Just a coincidence, surely. His gaze angled slightly towards the entrance, just enough to see without staring. One of his legs rested atop the other, his fingers slowly running along the condensation on his cup like he was stroking something alive. The baristas had actually long since stopped trying to make conversation with him after the second week of his silence. Now they just gave him a nod and slid the drink across the counter like passing a message in class.

James liked that. No performance necessary.

Outside, the sky was a matte grey and bleeding at the edges, threatening to rain but not committing. He watched the people passing, faces blurry behind the glass. His own reflection hovered faintly over the street scene, translucent and ghostlike, like he didn't belong in either world.

Then-

A flicker, a form, a scrape of the door.

James didn’t look immediately. He trained himself out of that a while ago. Look too fast, and you give away hunger. Look too slow, and you miss the feast.

But he knew.

Knew it from the shape of the shoulder under a hoodie, the tilt of a head scanning the menu board. The way that Will stood, weight on one leg, like he wasn’t fully tethered to the earth. He looked as if he were always thinking of somewhere else. Or someone.

He looked like he was thinking of James.

And then it happened. The flicker of the eyes. The tiny flash of realisation, no- recognition.

Will’s face lit up with the kind of smile people don’t realise they’re wearing. It tugged at his mouth, not wide, not bright, but *warm* . Like he was pleased. Like seeing James made something shift just slightly in his day. James let the moment wrap around him like silk. If he could bottle it, he would’ve drunk it in one gulp.

Will briskly, the coffee in his hand sloshing gently with the motion. “Is this seat free?” he asked, nodding to the chair opposite. James scoffed- as if he’d be wanting to see anybody else sitting opposite him.

“Wouldn’t dream of saying no.” His voice came out low and controlled. Will sat instantly, like it was nothing. Like it was *normal* . As if they hadn’t shared a straw on a park bench. As if James hadn’t installed a camera pointed directly at his front door. As if James hadn’t watched his run, over and over, like a hymn.

He settled further into his seat, and placed his coffee and croissant onto the table with a gentle motion. His delicate, distracted fingers started unwrapping the pastry, his eyes still soft from sleep, or maybe from the weather, or maybe- just maybe- from James. The silence was nice. Comfortable. And James hated that it felt that way.

Will stirred his drink, his attention drawn away from the pastry. “You always drink iced coffee in weather like this?”

James shrugged. “I don’t like the way hot coffee fogs up my glasses.”

“Oooo, ‘my glasses’.” Will’s voice was dragged thin with mockery, and James had to take a second to compose himself. A joke. A silly, funny joke. One friends make with one another, not just casual acquaintances. He tore his lips apart into a sly smile. Will’s eyes flicked up from his drink- and that smirk- God, that *smirk* . It was spread slow across his face like butter melting on warm bread.

“You know,” he said, tilting his head a little, “we really do keep bumping into each other.”

James answered immediately. “Some would call this a second date.”

Will let out a short laugh, shaking his head. “Second?”

James raised a brow, deadpan. “Alright, third, if you count the park bench. But that was mostly just you stealing my drink then running away. This-” He gestured vaguely between them, “-that makes this date two.”

Will gave him a look. “You’ve really thought about that.”

James hummed as if he was plagued by thought. “Yeah. Romantic, wasn’t it?”

Will laughed again, properly now, and James felt the sound like it had teeth, sharp and bright, lodging somewhere under his ribs. It was the kind of laugh that stayed in your memory long after the conversation faded. It would always be James’ favourite sound.

“You’ve got a funny way of flirting.” Will said, nudging his coffee closer to the edge of the table, like bait.

“I’m just honest,” James said, leaning back. “I don’t believe in playing hard to get.”

Will’s eyes narrowed slightly, playful. “Is that so?”

James shrugged. “Waste of time.”

There was a beat of quiet, like the weight of the moment had landed between them, soft and loaded. Will glanced down, picking at the edge of his napkin, then back up again. “You’re kind of strange.”

James smiled lazily. “Give it time. I grow on people.”

Will rolled his eyes. “Or get under their skin.”

“Same thing, really.” James said as he swirled the last bit of his drink, watching the ice clink against the glass. “You know,” he said, too lightly, “I make a mean iced coffee back at mine. Less bitter and more your style.”

Will looked up from the crumb he’d been absently chasing around his napkin. “Are you inviting me over?”

James pursed his lips, all faux nonchalance and crooked smile. “Just saying, if you ever want a version of this without the queue and sad background jazz… you know where to find me.”

Will raised an eyebrow. “Do I?”

James met his gaze and held it, just long enough. “You could.”

Will didn't answer straight away, his eyes flicked to James' hands which were still lazily toying with the glass, and then back up to meet his gaze. His eyes were measured, like he was weighing something.

"Hmm," Will drawled, the sound closer to amusement than agreement. "Sounds a bit forward for someone who's barely a third date in."

James grinned. "Ah, so you *are* counting them as dates."

Will huffed. "I'm just saying- seems like you're luring me in with caffeine. You move fast."

James leaned in slightly, elbows on the table. "Only when I know what I want."

That made Will pause. His smile didn't vanish, it just folded in on itself. Smaller. Sharper. His fingers drummed one against the table before stilling. "I'll think about it." He said, light but not dismissive. "But only if your coffee really is less bitter."

James' voice dropped, just enough. "It is, promise."

Will watched him for a moment longer, then glanced away, biting back the kind of smile you wear when you're both entertained and alert. Like walking barefoot through glass, just to see how deep it cuts.

James barely heard whatever Will said next. His mind had already slipped sideways, veering into the shadows of possibility. *Will. In his apartment.* In the same space he watched him from. Breathing his air. Sitting on his sofa, sipping something James made him, eyes scanning the room like it didn't belong to a lunatic who wanted to watch him brush his teeth in 4K.

He could already see it- Will on the windowsill, maybe. Laughing. Oblivious. Trusting.

It hit him all at once: the camera feeds, the files, the screenshots, the angles. The entire shrine of the sickness he'd curated. James sat up a little straighter, like he could shove the thought away by physically rearranging his posture. He'd been in his own head for too long.

"Sorry, what?"

Will looked amused. "You kinda spaced out."

James smiled, a shade too tight. "Just thinking."

"Dangerous habit."

"Not always." He cleared his throat, then added quickly- too quickly to sound casual, "I've got a cat. Otto."

Will raised an eyebrow. "You're a cat guy?"

James gave a slow shrug, eyes locked on Will's like they were the only stable thing in the room. "He doesn't talk back. Usually."

"Sounds like my kind of company," Will muttered, sipping his drink again.

James smiled, but his thoughts were far away. *Will. In his home. Meeting Otto. Seeing the place James had carefully, obsessively crafted into a stage for watching him.*

He was already moving furniture in his head. Already rehearsing the scene.

"So he runs the place?"

“Runs me.” James sipped his coffee, the bitterness grounding him. “He’s very particular. Stands on my chest at 3 a.m. if I forget to clean his litter box. Barks at birds he can’t catch. Sits on top of the fridge like a gargoyle. Real personality.”

“Sounds like he’s got standards.”

“He does.” James met his gaze. “Might even judge you.”

Will laughed. “I’ll try not to disappoint your cat.”

James said nothing, but the thought of Will standing in his apartment, bending down to greet Otto, letting him sniff his hand, maybe even scratch behind his ears- it practically short-circuited something in his brain. That simple, intimate image. Soft domesticity layered over the rotting, obsessive mess underneath. He pictured Otto weaving between Will’s legs. Not hissing. Approving. He’d take that as a sign.

“You’d like him,” James said, voice quieter now. “And he’s picky. So that’d be impressive.”

Will grinned. “Is that your way of saying I should meet him?”

James tilted his head again, eyes unreadable. “Just saying... if you ever wanted to.”

Will glanced at his phone, thumb brushing across the screen to check the time. The glow lit up his face for a second, and then it was gone- tucked away like the moment hadn’t happened.

But James saw it. Of course he did.

“You’re always in a rush,” James murmured, a smile playing at his mouth, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “What’s it like? Living in fast-forward?”

Will blinked, caught off guard, then let out a soft huff of a laugh. “What, you keeping tabs on my schedule now?”

James didn’t answer right away. He tilted his head, gaze steady. “Feels like I only ever get a few minutes with you,” he said lightly, but it landed with weight. “Then you vanish. Makes them... memorable.”

Will raised an eyebrow. “That a complaint?”

James, ever slow and fluid, sipped his coffee. “Observation.”

Will paused for a second too long. Then smiled, almost apologetically. “Time’s just tight lately.”

“Time always is,” James replied, eyes fixed on him like he could freeze the moment through sheer force of will. “But you make room for what you want.”

There it was. Not an accusation. Not quite. But something that clung. Will didn’t respond, instead, his fingers tapped once- twice- against the side of his cup. His gaze dropped to the table, following the rim of his drink like it suddenly held secrets worth decoding. Shoulders subtly tensed, chin lowered. *Retreat.*

James watched all of it. He drank it in like a punch to the gut.

James leaned back just a little, crossing one leg over the other, jaw tightening as his eyes flicked to the window. Not out of interest. Out of spite. Like if he couldn’t look at Will, he’d look at *anything but.* Will shifted in his seat. James caught it in his peripheral. The angle of his body turning inward, away. Not by much- but enough.

It wasn't the same as before. That spark, that easy warmth between them? It had cooled. Flattened into something awkward and wrong. Like they'd skipped a page and lost the plot. Like Will had remembered something he was trying to forget.

James didn't speak. He just pressed his tongue against the inside of his cheek, keeping his expression unreadable. Will glanced up briefly, and their eyes met. For a moment. Then Will looked away again. It was quiet. So quiet, it started to ache.

And James sat in it- stewed in it- chest tight, teeth grinding. Because this wasn't how it was meant to go. Not with Will. Not after everything. He folded his hands in his lap and pretended the distance didn't feel like punishment.

James broke the silence first. Of course he did. Silence was fine when it was controlled, when he was the one choosing it. But this silence growled. It was too loud.

"I'll admit," he said, voice quieter now, words sliding out like they weren't meant to be heard. "This isn't how I imagined our third date ending."

Will blinked with the smallest twitch of surprise. James offered a smile. Not charming- calculated. It landed somewhere between teasing and pleading. "Usually there's more laughter. Less existential dread."

Will's mouth tugged at the corner. Not quite a smile, not quite not. His gaze dropped to the tabletop for a second, like he was searching for the correct response in the swirls of coffee stains. "You still count this as a date?" he asked eventually, voice light, but the edge of it was sharp enough to draw blood if you touched it wrong.

James leaned forward just a fraction. Measured. Careful. "Technically, yes. I've paid for a drink, you've nearly ghosted me twice, and at one point I think we held hands." He paused, teasing with the realms of untruth. "Feels pretty textbook to me."

Will shook his head- barely- but that elusive smile ghosted over his lips. Ephemeral. James caught it and pocketed it like something sacred.

"I guess I'm a bad date," Will said, fingers skimming the edge of the napkin in front of him. He was forever restless.

"You're still here," James replied. And that landed like a dropped match in a dry field.

The moment after was heavy. Not with discomfort, not exactly. But with something else. Something that made the space between them feel tighter than it had any right to be. Will didn't reply. But he didn't look away either.

James could feel the electricity of it pulsing in his palms. Static clung to his fingertips. His brain was screaming a dozen things at once- *don't mess this up, keep it light, act normal, why is he looking at me like that, does he know* ?- but his face didn't flinch. Instead, he let the moment draw out, letting Will sit with it. He let himself stare, perhaps too long. Will's gaze flicked to the window and back. James didn't move. Somewhere in the background, someone's coffee machine hissed like a warning.

Will tilted his head just slightly, eyes narrowing- not unkind, just… curious. Surgical, even. "Do you always look at people like that?"

James blinked but he didn't flinch and didn't smile. That would've been too easy, too performative. Instead, he let the words settle into his chest like cold water. He knew exactly what Will meant.

That look. That gaze. The way James watched him like he was something fragile, or sacred, or already his. Like he was trying to memorise the architecture of Will's soul through sheer force of attention.

James tilted his head, a mirror to Will's posture. "Like what?" he asked, voice too smooth. Like honey poured over broken glass.

Will’s lips twitched. “Like you’re about to eat me alive.”

That. That nearly made James choke on his own breath. But he didn't. Not on the outside. He let the pause drag, just for effect. Just to feel the heat crawl up his own spine.

“I only look like that,” he said slowly, “when I can’t decide if I’m admiring someone… or trying to figure out what they’re hiding.”

Will leaned back a little, like he was giving James space- but not really. It was a game of inches. His smile was there now, lazily blooming at the edges of his mouth. “And which one am I?”

James let out a soft sound. A laugh without the laugh. “You tell me.”

Will didn’t. He just looked at him. Really looked. As if- just for a second- he wanted to understand why it suddenly felt like this was something far more dangerous than it should be. Then he looked away. Back to his drink. He let the silence wash over them again. But now it was hot and heavy, buzzing beneath the surface like static before a storm. James looked at Will the same way he always did. The same way he would later that night, alone. The same way he had through glass, through grainy screens, through memory and obsession and want.

And Will had noticed. And said something.

And James couldn’t decide if that was a problem… or the best part of his day.

The silence between them stretched- not heavy, not awkward, just… close. Will didn’t speak, and neither did James. They sat across from one another, half-finished drinks in hand, the table between them suddenly feeling thinner than before.

Will's fingers tapped absently at the sleeve of his cup. James’s eyes followed the motion like prey in tall grass.

And then-

A crash.

Somewhere near the counter, a ceramic mug shattered against the tiled floor. A sharp noise. Sharp enough that everyone turned- except James. Will's head flicked up, startled, eyes scanning for the source. A barista cursed under her breath as she stooped to collect the shards. James didn't move. He just kept looking at Will. That same slow, deliberate look that had no business being that quiet.

Will noticed, eventually. His head turned back, his eyes catching James's. His expression faltered- not shocked, not amused. Just… curious. Slightly guarded.

James didn't pretend to be embarrassed. He just said, voice low and almost fond, "You flinch easily."

Will's brows twitched up, like he wasn't sure if that was a statement or a warning. "Normal people react to loud noises."

James hummed thoughtfully. "Guess I'm not normal, then."

Their eyes held, a beat too long. Long enough to feel like a dare. And for the first time, Will didn't smile.

"Yeah. I noticed."

It wasn't even what Will said. It was how. Not sharp, not soft. Measured. Neutral. But it landed like a hand around James's throat- tight, quiet, lingering. He replayed it. Immediately. A dozen times in his mind before Will had even looked away.

Yeah. I noticed.

Yeah, *I* noticed.

Yeah, I *noticed.*

The cadence shifted with each iteration, like twisting a kaleidoscope- every turn revealing a new colour, a new shape of meaning. Accusation. Curiosity. Flirtation. A warning. A confession. James sat there, pulse crawling up his throat, as if Will had slipped a hook behind his ribs and tugged. He wondered if Will knew what that line did to him. If he'd dropped it like bait. If he meant it.

But James didn't believe in coincidences. He believed in signs. In signs that looked like dropped words and locked gazes and hands brushing over a fallen coffee cup. And *this* - this quiet, almost-offhand line? It nestled in the back of his skull like a flame behind frosted glass. Flickering. Waiting. Hungry. James inhaled once, deep and trembling, and let it settle in his chest like something permanent. Like it belonged there. Like *Will* did.

Will stood, casual but not rushed, gathering his things with that signature calm- like he moved through life to his own metronome, never out of rhythm.

"Gotta run," he said, offering a half-smile. Not warm. Not cold. Just... unreadable. James hated that. He wanted a label for every twitch of Will's mouth. James looked up, and nodded. Maybe said something- he couldn't remember. His brain was thick with fog and caffeine and the phantom echo of *Yeah, I noticed* . And then Will was gone. Just like that. The bell above the café door jingled like a tiny guillotine.

James blinked. Once. Twice. Looked down.

And there it was.

A folded scrap of paper. Nestled near the sugar packet Will had fidgeted with the entire time. Neat. Intentional. His name on the outside- *James* - written in blocky, confident handwriting. Like Will didn't doubt for a second he'd leave it. Or that James would find it. Inside: a phone number. That's it. No "text me," no emoji, no *x* —just numbers. Pure. Clean. Strategic. James stared at it. Heart tight. Mouth dry.

He hadn’t seen Will leave it. Hadn’t clocked the motion. Not a flicker, not a clue. And he *watched* Will. Studied him like scripture. And still- nothing. He sat back, paper light in his hand, and let a slow, stunned grin creep up his face.

He’s *good.*

He’s *better* than James expected.

James turned the paper over in his fingers like it might whisper to him if he held it right. As if it had breath. Weight. Something human. He pulled out his phone with the quiet reverence of a man unboxing a relic. A holy object, delivered not by post but by fate wearing a smug smile and a hoodie.

He opened the Contacts app. Hovered. Blinked. A number without a name was like a stranger in his home. And Will- Will was no stranger anymore. For a second- just a beat- he considered putting in *Will* . Simple. Clean. Logical. But no. That felt... dishonest. Will wasn’t just Will. Not anymore.

“Distraction.”

Saved. Locked. Etched into glass and code like a secret sin. Because that’s what Will was, wasn’t he? A beautiful disruption. A fracture in James’ timeline. A distraction he’d never recover from. And the worst part? He didn’t want to.

James stepped through the door and shut it behind him with a click, a little too soft, like if he made a noise too loud the moment would rupture. His coat was still warm from the outside air, his hand still faintly buzzing from the brush of his fingers on a cold brew an hour earlier. But the world outside had melted away already. The flat was cold and silent, save for the low hum of appliances and Otto’s soft patter across the kitchen floor. He didn’t pet him. He moved straight to the side table, pulled his phone from his coat pocket, and opened the feed.

The stairwell camera flickered to life. Static, then grain. Then sharpness. Will's door was still closed. James sat and waited. He took a sip of water and let it sit in his mouth too long, as if time would move differently if he stayed completely still. Minutes passed whilst his foot bounced. He didn't dare blink.

Then- movement.

Will appeared.

James leaned forward so sharply Otto flinched and darted under the sofa. He didn't even notice. Will was walking up the stairwell, his hood pushed back, earphones in, jacket half-zipped. He reached his door like he'd done a thousand times, and James had watched it like he had done with every one before. But something… something was off. Will slowed. He glanced to his left. Then his right. The pause wasn't long, in fact it was barely noticeable. But James noticed. He froze the feed. Rewound it. Watched it again. And again. Will turned his head just slightly. His gaze swept the corridor, brief, lazy, almost. But deliberate. Like someone checking for something they didn't want to find. James sat unbearably still. That look- it wasn't aimless. It was too slow to be casual. Too intentional to be instinct.

James scrubbed the video back again. He watched the angle of Will's head, the way his eyes flicked over the stairwell. Not just looking for noise, but looking *for* something. Like he sensed a presence, or, rather, didn't *want* to. James pressed his knuckles to his lips, leaned back, and let the silence settle over him like a storm cloud. Will unlocked his door, stepped inside, and closed it gently.

James stared at the screen, still frozen on the moment Will glanced at the lens. Not directly- no. But it was close enough to make something crawl. *He felt it.* His own heartbeat sounded too loud. Otto mewed softly from beneath the couch, almost like he was asking if everything was okay. It wasn't.

It never was.

II

James lay flat on his back in the dim apartment, the ceiling an empty canvas above him, speckled with fractured moonlight that leaked through the half-closed blinds. Otto curled at the foot of the bed, unmoved, unbothered. A king in repose. James? Not so lucky.

The air was warm with static restlessness. A bead of sweat clung to his temple and refused to fall, mocking him. His phone rested face-down on the pillow beside him, screen dead, like it too had given up trying to comfort him.

He didn't *need* to text Will.

He just… could.

He could, theoretically. Hypothetically. If he wanted to. If it made sense. If Will hadn't left his number with a little flourish like he *knew* it would mess with him. James had stared at it for so long that day- digits written in that boyish, looping handwriting, the ink slightly smudged where Will had pressed the paper against his palm. Like a signature. Or a blessing. He rolled onto his side, arm curling beneath his head. He reached for the phone. Just to look. That was all. It blinked to life with the familiar weight of inevitability.

Distraction.

That's what he'd saved it under. Cute. Precautionary. Pathetic. He tapped the name with his thumb, and the blank chat screen opened like a wound. No messages yet. No context. Just space. Infinite, awful space.

He typed something.

"Hey."

Then deleted it. Too vague.

“Hey, it’s James from the café.”

Delete. Too formal. What was he, a solicitor?

“Didn’t expect the number. Bit sly.”

Delete. Jesus Christ.

He could see Will reading any of those and laughing. Not in a cruel way- Will didn’t *seem* cruel- but in that way beautiful people laugh when they realise someone’s a little too eager. A little too off-centre. He dropped the phone on his chest with a groan and stared at the ceiling again. This was ridiculous. He wasn’t *fifteen* . He was an adult. An adult with a job. And a surveillance operation.

But also? A man alone. In the dark. Wanting someone’s attention so badly his chest felt hollow. He picked the phone up again. This time, he didn’t overthink. Just let his thumbs move.

James

‘You always leave numbers like that, or am I just lucky?’

Sent. There. Done. Out there. A digital scream in the void. He threw the phone aside and lay motionless, every nerve on fire with what he might have done. The moment you send something like that, the universe shifts. Or maybe it was just him. A little tilt in his spine. A hot, quiet shame in his belly. Otto stretched beside him, sighed, and went still again. James turned onto his side and stared into the dark. Now all he had to do was wait. Or drown. Same thing, really.

His phone buzzed, just once. One sharp pulse that sent his heart into a tailspin and his stomach straight into the pit of hell. He didn't move at first, he didn't breathe. He just laid there in the dark like some haunted Victorian bride waiting to be noticed. Then- too fast- he grabbed the phone. The screen lit up.

Distraction

'Only sometimes.'

James blinked. Read it again. And again. The words weren't laced with emojis or exclamation marks. No fluff. Just... that. Clean. Confident. Teasing. How interesting. He let the phone fall onto the sheets again, heart thudding like a warning. What the fuck did that mean? Sometimes being how often? Sometimes in the "I want to kiss you in a dark corner" way or the "You're a walking red flag but I'm bored" kind of way? He picked the phone up again, hesitated, then typed.

James

'Couldn't sleep. Blaming your coffee recommendation.'

Sent. Fuck. Why did he send that? He stared at the three little dots that blinked to life immediately- like Will had been waiting. Like he'd wanted the reply. That thought alone made James' throat tighten.

Distraction

'Yeah, I don't drink it past 4pm for that reason. Rookie mistake.'

James' lips twitched. Easy. Natural. But his heart was thrumming in his throat.

James

'Noted.'

'Guess you're full of good advice.'

Distraction

‘Don’t sound so surprised.’

Pause. Long enough for James to feel it.

Distraction

‘You still up because of the caffeine, or something else?’

James stared at that. He let it echo. He wasn’t quite sure what the meaning was behind it, but oh he was desperate to find out.

James

‘I guess my head just doesn’t shut up sometimes.’

Distraction

‘Yeah. I get that.’

‘Best cure I’ve found is distraction.’

James read that one a few times. He rolled it around, thinking about how damn ironic it was.

James

‘Are you offering?’

Distraction

‘Maybe.’

‘Depends if you’re the type that likes conversation or chaos.’

James laughed. Quiet and rough.

James

‘Is that your way of saying you’re bad at small talk?’

Distraction

‘Terrible at it. But I’m good at listening.’

James didn’t reply for a moment. The words made his stomach tighten. He wasn’t used to people saying things like that. Not and meaning it. He typed slowly, cautiously, like the messages might unfurl into something sinister.

James

‘I think I’m better in person.’

He didn’t bother adding ‘because over message I can’t study your body language or see your smile’.

Distraction

‘Then maybe we should fix that sometime.’

James blinked. He blinked again. His hands suddenly felt cold. He could imagine it, he could see it so clearly with no effort at all. Will in his flat, in the chair by the window. Looking at his books. His cat. Him. Smiling at the view outside the window and hopefully not noticing how his flat is directly opposite.

James

‘Maybe.’

‘Though fair warning… Otto might not like you as much as I do.’

Distraction

‘So I’ll bring bribes. Duly noted.’

James let the silence stretch. Then, like he couldn’t help himself:

James

‘You’re really easy to talk to, you know.’

Distraction

‘You’d be surprised how rare it is that people say that.’

James

‘Maybe I’m not like most people.’

Distraction

‘No, James. I don’t think you are.’

There it was. Simple. Undeniable. Weightless in tone, but devastating in impact. James had read it five times already, and each time it changed shape. Each time it grew teeth. He wasn’t like most people. Will had seen that. Will had said that. And it wasn’t fearful. It wasn’t suspicious. It was something else- warm, amused, like he liked that James was strange. Like he was intrigued by it. James could’ve laughed. Or cried. Or both. Instead, he just kept staring. His phone screen dimmed. He tapped it again. It was still there. Those same words. That same message. His finger hovered, tempted to screenshot it. Preserve it. Like a pressed flower, delicate and real and *proof* . Proof that this wasn’t all in his head.

Otto made a soft noise beside him, curled like a comma against his hip. James barely registered it. His whole world had collapsed into a single conversation and the thin blue light

bathing his face. His pulse was a quiet riot in his ears. Because *this* was happening. He wasn't imagining it. Will had spoken to him- comfortably, playfully. Will had called him not like most people, and smiled when they touched fingers at the café, and left his number like it was a secret slipped under the door of something sacred. James shifted in bed, the sheets rustling, but he didn't feel them. His body was here, but his mind was somewhere else. Somewhere brighter. Louder. Full of the possibility that maybe- just maybe- Will was interested.

Not just polite. Not just kind. Interested.

And James hated how fast that thought built a home inside him. How quickly it set up curtains and hung fairy lights and started painting the walls. *He likes you* , it whispered. *He's watching you too.*

That voice was dangerous. That voice was stupid. But it was sweet. Syrupy. Addictive. He didn't *want* to be this kind of person. The kind who clings to sentences like lifeboats. The kind who screens every syllable for signs. The kind who memorises message timestamps and reads meaning in every ellipsis. But he was. He always had been.

James rolled onto his side, phone pressed to his chest like a holy relic. He could still see Will's face in the glow of memory- his smile, crooked and easy, the way his lip curled when he laughed, like it surprised even him. The smell of him. That faint salt of sweat from the park, the clean soap of his neck, the heat of him when he leaned across the café table. He hadn't meant to think about that. But now that he had, he couldn't stop.

James' mind flitted to his flat- imagining Will in it. Sitting on the windowsill. Kneeling to greet Otto. His mug in Will's hands. His scent on the air. He wouldn't be freaked out, James told himself. He'd be curious. He'd explore. He'd ask questions and touch things. He wouldn't judge. Not really. And James would watch him- not through a screen, but from across the room. Without glass in the way. Without pixelation. Just real. Just there.

He bit his thumbnail. Hard. He tried to ground himself.

He was spiralling. He knew it. He wasn't stupid. But the thing about spiralling was, once you noticed it, you were already halfway down. And the speed only picked up. James unlocked his phone again. Re-read the thread. Every bubble a loaded gun. He ran his hand over his

face, covering his mouth. The smile underneath was involuntary. Embarrassing. He felt like a teenager. Worse- he felt hopeful. And hope was a slippery thing. It wriggled in your grasp. Made a fool of you when you dared to hold it tight.

Still, James clutched it like a prayer. In the quiet, he whispered to Otto, just to hear himself say it: “Maybe he really *is* watching me too.” Otto didn’t stir.

The ceiling fan hummed. A slow, pathetic whir, like even it couldn’t be bothered to spin properly. It cast soft, lazy shadows across the room, and James followed each one like it was Will’s fingertip dragging against his skin. Ridiculous. Embarrassing. Perfect.

He sat up.

He couldn’t lie still anymore- not with his heart like this, all jagged edges and friction. Not with his brain replaying that moment in the café: Will’s eyes lingering, his hands brushing James’ across the table, the stupid, innocent smile when their fingers touched like it wasn’t the single most electrifying contact James had ever had in his entire life. And then- *then*- Will had walked away, leaving him sitting there like a ghost while a piece of paper with his number fluttered on the table like it had been there all along.

That kind of thing? That wasn’t an accident. That was theatre. That was deliberate. *Calculated* . Will knew what he was doing. Which meant James wasn’t the only one playing this game. He wouldn’t text again. He couldn’t. Will would think he was clingy. Desperate. He was, of course, but Will didn’t need to know that. Not yet.

Will’s typing style- casual, sure of himself. And James had noticed that. He’d noticed everything. The way Will sent messages like he was mid-laugh. Like the phone wasn’t important, just a brief extension of whatever rhythm his mind moved to. James had always loved rhythm. Predictability… Routines… Structure. And now Will was becoming one.

James stood abruptly and paced to the kitchen, barefoot on cold tile, phone still in hand like it was fused to his skin. He poured himself a glass of juice without thinking. Orange. Too sharp. It burned a little on the way down. Good. He deserved that. He imagined Will standing in the same kitchen. Asking questions about his appliances. His plates. Touching Otto’s ears. God, he could see it so clearly. Like it had already happened. That was the problem with James’ mind. It filled in gaps too easily. It wanted to create. It wanted to fantasise. It wanted-

The phone buzzed. James nearly dropped it. His heart kicked sideways.

Distraction

‘Are you still awake?’

He stared. Mouth dry. Brain screaming. Every part of him trembling like something divine had just stepped into the room. He didn’t answer immediately. He couldn’t. He had to compose. Be cool. Be like Will- careless, offhand, charming in a way that didn’t look like effort. He waited exactly twenty seconds, then typed.

James

‘Barely. Thinking too much.’

He hit send. Hands sweating. *Fuck* . Three dots appeared instantly, Will was typing. James gripped the counter like it might float away without him.

Distraction

‘You’re a master of dangerous habits.’

James exhaled, half a laugh and half a sob. He’s still here. He’s still talking. He didn’t disappear, even when James’ responses were lacking. He leaned against the fridge, juice forgotten, the light from the phone painting him ghostly.

James

‘You make it hard not to.’

Another buzz.

Distraction

‘Do I?’

James typed, deleted, typed again.

James

‘Maybe. Or maybe I'm just easily distracted.’

And then nothing. No reply. Not immediately. James stared at the screen so long the words blurred. His breath caught. He could feel the panic rising, subtle and sticky. Had he said too much? Had it come off too strong? His fingers hovered, already about to type *sorry.* Already about to backtrack, explain, dilute, self-destruct-

Buzz.

Distraction

‘Good night, James.’

Two seconds later.

Distraction

‘Sweet dreams.’

And James sank slowly to the kitchen floor, back against the cold appliance, phone pressed to his chest, eyes closed. It wasn’t a lot. But it was everything. And the silence that followed? It wasn’t empty. It was full. Brimming with hope. With the unbearable promise that maybe-maybe- Will would be the first person who ever really saw him and didn’t look away. He whispered to Otto, barely audible: “Sweet dreams, he said.”

Otto blinked at him. Unimpressed. Always unimpressed. But James didn’t care. Not tonight. Because for the first time in what felt like forever, the window wasn’t the only place where the light came in. He didn’t reply to Will’s goodnight message, he simply reacted to the bubbles with a heart emoji on each one.

III

The camera feed blinked softly in the dim light of James' apartment, glowing from the tablet propped against an empty cereal bowl on the dining table. The rest of the room was cast in shadows, save for the occasional amber flicker from a streetlight leaking through the curtains. Otto sat nearby on a windowsill, his tail flicking rhythmically, eyes trained on nothing, everything. The low hum of the radiator barely cut through the stillness.

James sat hunched, half-asleep and yet wired, his finger trailing the rim of his mug, lukewarm tea forgotten. The screen didn't move for a long time. Static hallway. Silent stillness. No one. Then, movement.

James straightened instantly, spine stiff, heartbeat lifting with reflexive urgency. The lens adjusted as Will came into view, stepping into the stairwell, gym bag slung over one shoulder, hoodie clinging damp to his collarbone.

It was always something visceral, watching him like this. There was a rhythm to it now, a pattern. James had memorised the way Will walked up those stairs. Which foot he favoured when tired. The shoulder he leaned into the rail with. The way his hand hovered half a second too long over his keys when unlocking the door, like the weight of the day always pressed down in that final moment. But this time-

Will paused again like he had not too long ago. James held his breath.

He didn't go straight to his door like usual. Instead, Will's head turned- slowly, deliberately- his eyes scanning the upper corners of the walls. His body shifted, cautious. Intentional. James leaned in.

Will took a step back, looking up, scanning the wall across from his own door, and then-

directly towards the hidden camera. James froze. The breath he'd been holding caught sharp in his throat, his fingers tightening around the edge of the table.

Will was looking. He was really looking. Seconds passed. An eternity compressed into frames. But Will didn't see it. His gaze drifted away. He scratched the back of his head, sighed, and then turned the key in his door. Stepped inside. Gone.

James exhaled like he'd just broken the surface of water. His hand trembled slightly as he reached for his phone, unlocking it with a thumb slick with sweat. Notifications. Emails. A missed call from someone he didn't care about. Nothing from Will. Nothing since their late night message exchange. It had been a week since- that was it. No more. The silence after it had stretched too long, like a string pulled taut and left dangling. He hadn't seen Will in person since. Not even a glimpse. James had passed by the café. Sat there. Waited. Nothing.

And now he was searching for cameras.

James leaned back in his chair and looked at the ceiling, as if expecting divine instruction to drop from the cracks. Nothing but quiet. Even Otto was still. The thought started small. It always did. A whisper in the back of his mind. What if Will knew? What if he had known all along? What if the number, the flirting, the half-smiles, were all part of some game James hadn't realised he was losing? James swallowed. He tapped the text box, then let his fingers hover. Deleted the blank message. He stood up instead and moved to the window, pushed the curtain aside with the back of his knuckles. Across the street, Will's apartment window was dark. Curtains drawn. James tilted his head, watching, waiting for some flicker of motion, a silhouette, a light. Nothing.

He whispered, almost inaudibly: "Where are you?"

Behind him, Otto jumped down from the windowsill and padded silently across the floor. James didn't turn. The silence of the room pressed in on him, thick and cloying. Everything felt suspended. The week had stretched out like molasses, slow and sticky and impossible to escape. Each day with no Will was like a note left unresolved, humming with tension. He had gone to the café twice. Sat on that exact stool. Ordered the same drink. He had walked the route past Will's street, casually, like he didn't know it by heart.

James moved to the dining table again and picked up his tablet. Replayed the footage.

Will, pausing. Will, looking. Will, turning his head like he knew. Pause. Frame. Zoom.

James' own heartbeat echoed in his ears. He reached out and scratched Otto behind the ear without looking, the way one might turn off a light in a room they're not thinking about.

"He's getting smarter," James said under his breath. Otto meowed softly in response, flicking his tail. James sat down again, leaned on his elbows, and looked at the feed. Stillness. But not calm. He was starting to understand the difference.

What if Will was just... waiting? Giving him enough rope. Enough space to hang himself with. What if James had already lost the game, and Will was just watching now? Letting him scramble? He'd seen people leave before. People who got too close, people who thought they'd figured him out. They always ran eventually. Sometimes with fear. Sometimes with pity.

But Will wasn't like them. Was he? James rubbed his hands together, knuckles cracking like tired branches. "I'm not losing him," he whispered.

And then, the thought bloomed- ugly, inevitable. More cameras. More angles. Just to be sure. He could rig the hallway with a second one, lower down. Or something outside, camouflaged in the trees. There were tech forums full of solutions. Discreet options. Ways to make surveillance art.

He moved to his desk. Pulled out the laptop. Tabs opened. Carts filled. All while Otto leapt silently into his lap and curled there, warm and purring. James barely noticed. He was already building the next frame. Because the feed had gone still, and Will had paused- and the pause meant something. Everything meant something now.

And as he stared at the screen, a whisper crawled into his mind: Is this even *ethical* ? The question scratched against his ribs like something half-alive. Would Will ever find out? Would it break something? Would it matter? James sat back slowly, his face unreadable. The glow of the screen cast shadows across his cheekbones, making hollows where softness should have lived.

He shook his head. He was James Fucking Marriott. Nobody got to him. Nobody ever had. Will had gotten close. Too close. Closer than anyone else had dared to. But James could still

be in control. He had to be. Control was everything. Without it, he was just static—just noise. And he wasn't noise. He was the one listening. He always had been.

“Should I be more careful?” James murmured, eyes still fixed on the screen as if the pixels might answer him. Otto looked up at him with languid, indifferent eyes. “I mean- should I wait? Store the cameras, hold off until he…” James waved vaguely at the screen, “…until he gives me something to work with. A reason. A real slip. Not just suspicion.”

Otto blinked slowly. Useless cat. James chuckled under his breath, a dry, bitter sound. “You’re right. I’m overthinking. Again.”

He sat back and let the silence stretch, the glow from the screen casting long, thin shadows across his face. He reached out and scratched under Otto’s chin. “But he noticed something, didn’t he? He’s not stupid.” The weight of paranoia clung to him like second skin.

James rose slowly, the chair legs scraping lightly against the wood. He padded toward the bathroom, flicking the light on. It was sterile and too clean, the kind of clean that only comes from a man with no real visitors. He stared at his reflection for a long moment- dark hair messy, shadows under his eyes like bruises. Then, wordlessly, he reached for his toothbrush. Mechanical motion. Paste. Rinse. Brush.

His eyes drifted shut as he brushed, thoughts spiralling in dark constellations. Will, walking through that stairwell. Will, noticing. Will, not texting back. Was this all unraveling?

He brushed harder. The bristles scraped gum. Metal-on-metal intensity. The tang of blood bloomed in his mouth. He stopped. Spat.

Bright red in the sink.

His hand gripped the edge of the counter. Breathing shallow. James stared into the mirror. Blood staining the corners of his mouth like he’d bitten his own tongue in a dream.

“It’s fine,” he whispered. “It’s okay.”

He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and stared at the smear. “Will remembers me. He left a number. He smiled. He sat with me.”

He pressed his fingertips to the glass like he might hold his reflection in place. “He hasn’t left yet.”

And somewhere inside, he told himself that was still enough.

The knock on the door was soft, forgettable- just a casual thud against wood, but James felt it like a punch to the ribs. He didn’t move at first. Just sat there, breath halting in his throat, eyes flicking toward the sound like a cat sensing a threat- or a gift.

A package. It had to be. He knew the delivery window by heart. Knew the weight of it, the tracking status, the exact time it had been marked "out for delivery." He had refreshed the app twelve times in the last hour.

Another knock. A beat of silence. Then, footsteps fading. Only then did he rise. He opened the door slowly, cautiously, like a man expecting a body on the other side. Instead: a small, nondescript cardboard box on the mat. Plain. Unremarkable. The label peeled slightly at the corner.

It was funny how something so small could carry so much gravity. Like it should be glowing. Humming with power. The box was ordinary- but his heart pounded like it held something sacred. He crouched, fingers hovering above the cardboard. Then, carefully, reverently, he picked it up.

He didn’t close the door right away, he just stood there, holding the box like it might break, like it might detonate. The hallway behind him was dark. Otto sat by the window again, tail twitching. Watching him. Judging him.

“I know,” James murmured to him. “You think I’m crazy.”

Otto blinked, unimpressed. James shut the door. He took the box to the kitchen, set it on the counter like it was a bomb he needed to defuse. Then he stood there, hands braced on either side, staring at it. He knew what was inside- had memorised the product specs. The dimensions. The frame rate. The motion detection capabilities. The sleek matte finish. The silence of it. Except this time, there were multiple. It was exactly the same as before- and he briefly wondered when the dispatcher would consider him dangerous.

Still, he opened it slowly. Like unwrapping something sacred. He peeled back the tape with a knife, neat and deliberate, as if mess would somehow taint the process. The cardboard creaked. Paper folded. And then, nestled in bubble wrap, sat the cameras. Small. Elegant. Indistinguishable from nothing. He turned one over in his hand, and felt the weight of it. His thumb brushed the lens, gentle, almost affectionate. He could hide it anywhere. Behind a vent. Inside a plant. In a picture frame. He could see everything.

Control, in the palm of his hand. He looked up at Otto. “I know what you’re thinking,” James said. “But he’s the one who keeps showing up. He sat with me. *He* left the number. Not me. I need to see more, not just his stairwell.”

Otto did not respond. James took that as agreement. He cradled the camera like a secret and carried it to the table, setting it beside the tablet. The hallway feed still glowed. Static. Waiting. Soon, there’d be more. James leaned down, resting his chin on his folded arms, eyes locked on the blank screen.

"You're not going anywhere this time," he whispered, to no one.

To Will.

To the idea of him. The echo. The absence.

He reached into the box again and took out the charging cables, the mounts, the tiny screws. He laid them out like a surgeon preparing for an operation. Everything had a place. Everything had a purpose. His phone buzzed- an automated email confirming delivery. He didn't look.

His mind was elsewhere now, in stairwells and corners and pockets of shadow. He was already planning. Mapping angles in his head. He'd learned which shadows were useful. He knew the layout of Will's building better than Will probably did. There were so many places you could hide if you were small. Clever. Quiet. Just like this camera. Just like him.

IIII

James was in a tree.

High up, branches tucked under his thighs, arms awkwardly balanced as he reached with a screwdriver to tighten the camera into the wooden bark. The world below looked far away- his apartment, Will's building, the communal garden, the path that led to the pond.

It wasn't the first camera. It wasn't even the second.

Earlier that morning, he'd fixed one to the apartment block's outer door, nestled just above the buzzer, disguised inside a dummy light casing. Then he'd crouched beside the pond, pretending to scroll on his phone while slotting another lens beneath the metal railing.

And now this one- aimed at the road. The turnoff that forked between his block and Will's.

This camera would catch them both.

James took a breath, blinking sweat out of his eye. It was stupidly hot. The bark scratched through his hoodie. He looked down to the ground. A fox darted along the fence line and disappeared. A neighbour's car pulled in- brakes screeching slightly. No one looked up.

No one ever did.

He adjusted the lens just slightly, twisted it toward the bend in the road. He knew Will's car by now- cheap, forgettable, always parked near the hedge. If Will came home, he'd know.

More importantly, he'd know if Will wasn't.

James sat back against the trunk, letting the screwdriver fall into his lap. He wasn't in a rush. No one cared what he did. He could sit up here for an hour and no one would blink. He half-wanted someone to see. Half-wanted to explain it. "Security," he could say. "For the building. For the pond."

It was all true. Depending on who you asked.

The wind rustled through the leaves, brushing against his neck like fingers. He closed his eyes for a second. Just a second. When he opened them, he looked across the garden again. Will's building. Still. Silent. No sign of movement.

James licked his dry lips. He wondered where Will was now. Work? Gym? With someone else? The thought made his stomach twist. He gripped the tree branch tighter.

He could wait a bit longer. He wasn't done yet.

The bark was rough beneath his fingertips, splintered in places where the tree had shed layers like old skin. James crouched on the wide branch, balanced with one knee bent and the other foot braced against a gnarled limb that jutted out like a crooked elbow.

His fingers twisted the bracket with careful precision, tightening the grip around the branch. The plastic mount was practically invisible under the moss and shadow.

As he worked, James chewed the inside of his cheek, hard enough to taste the rawness. The thought swirled again: Was this psychotic?

No.

No. God, no.

He wasn't out of control. He wasn’t- dangerous. He wasn’t insane. He was… interested. Deeply, profoundly interested. With the sort of focus most people only applied to prayer or addiction.

Infatuation, maybe. A craving. The cameras weren’t wrong. They were insight. Tools. They weren’t about power. They were about clarity. Will had been distant.

Something had changed.

James wasn’t going to just sit in the dark and wonder. No- he needed to see. To know. To anticipate. If Will was slipping, then James needed to be the net.

The final camera clicked into place. He adjusted the lens with two fingers, tilting it slightly to the left. Perfect. As the branch creaked beneath him, he stayed still, just for a moment, breathing in the filtered light. The world from up here felt paused, like he was the only real thing moving in it.

Maybe the cameras were to protect Will. That thought had been rising more and more lately, slippery and seductive. This wasn’t obsession. This was concern. Vigilance. What if something happened to Will and James hadn’t been watching? What if some stranger hurt him, took him, shattered something soft inside him- and James could’ve stopped it, if he’d just been looking?

The idea settled like a crown on his head. Unstable, glorious.

People didn’t get it. They didn’t see Will the way James did. That smile wasn’t careless. It was deliberate, calculated. A shell. James had seen what was behind it. The exhaustion. The vulnerability. That moment Will paused on the stairwell and looked up- that wasn’t suspicion. That was fear. Fear of the world, of not being safe. And James? James could be safety. James could be his spine when Will’s legs shook.

He ran a hand through his hair and leaned against the tree trunk, legs dangling like he was some twisted parody of a child playing lookout. In a way, he was. Playing guardian angel with hidden lenses and secret screens.

The wind stirred the leaves and for a second James imagined Will's voice in it. Laughing. That laugh from the café. He closed his eyes and let it echo in his skull.

That grin. Those eyes. James opened his own and stared out toward Will's apartment block.

"I'm not crazy," he muttered to the air. "I'm just… loyal."

And the cameras? They were just proof. Proof of loyalty. Proof of devotion. No different than photos in a wallet or love notes tucked under pillows. Just a little more… advanced.

James climbed down slowly, not bothering to brush the dirt from his hands. He had bigger things to hold onto. Will had gone quiet. James would listen harder. The city didn't need to know. The world didn't need to understand. This was between him, the trees, and the blinking red lights that saw everything.

James crouched again, checking the lens alignment one last time. His fingertip brushed the camera's rim, steadying it with unnecessary care- like he was tucking a stray hair behind someone's ear. The glossy eye of the lens stared back at him, smooth and unblinking. And for a moment, he saw himself in it.

Not fully- just a warped shimmer, bent around the curve of the glass. But it was him. His face. Dark circles under his eyes. Sweat dampening the collar of his shirt. Mud on his jeans. Hair flattened from the hood of his jacket. Like a creature someone had dragged out of a nightmare and told to *smile* .

He didn't smile.

His reflection looked… *off.* Like someone he wouldn't talk to on the street. Someone he'd cross the road to avoid. He blinked and tilted his head, studying it- this distorted stranger with desperate eyes, caught mid-breath like he'd been doing something he wasn't supposed to. That voice, the one that lived in the softest, oldest part of his brain, whispered:

This is wrong. This is wrong. This is wrong.

Every moral handbook, every podcast with ominous music and calm-voiced women describing red flags- every warning he'd ever half-listened to- it all pressed in on him now. The kind of stories people whispered about in group chats. Obsessive men. Creepy exes. The kind of people Will probably had jokes about. The kind of stories Will would *mock* .

Was he becoming that?

His stomach turned. He sat back on the branch, wiping a hand down his face. He felt hot. Flushed. Like he'd been caught, even though no one was around. Even though he was hidden under a fortress of leaves and bark and delusion.

A flicker in the corner of his eye.

His breath hitched as he turned, parting a branch with two fingers. There he was.

Will.

Stepping off the pavement and cutting through the communal path, headed toward the apartment block entrance. Phone in hand, earbuds in. Oblivious. Effortless. Beautiful. The guilt didn’t vanish- it *evaporated* . Like it had never existed in the first place. James stayed still, tucked behind the thick green, completely out of sight. Of course Will didn’t see him. He wasn’t meant to. That was the point. That was the *design.*

And seeing Will like that- unguarded, real, *his* - it made everything click back into place. Of course he was doing this. Of course it was valid. What else was he supposed to do? Sit around and just let Will drift away, disappear into the mist like everyone else had? No. This was care. This was consistency. This was *attention.* He was still watching as Will punched in the building code and slipped through the door. The latch clicked behind him.

James leaned back against the tree, breath slow, shoulders easing. Everything settled again. It wasn't weird. It wasn't wrong. It was just what he *had* to do.

James climbed down from the tree like he'd just performed an exorcism. Limbs sore, adrenaline crashing. Leaves clung to his jacket and bark scuffed his palms, but he didn't notice any of it. His eyes were locked on his phone before his boots even touched the ground. He stood under the low canopy of branches, back to the trunk, fingers already unlocking his screen. The chat with Will was still pinned to the top, as if the phone *knew* what mattered most.

The thread was quiet. Still. Untouched since last week. But it *glowed,* like a shrine. James stared at it, thumb hovering. He didn't want to sound desperate. Didn't want to sound like he'd just installed surveillance equipment like a deranged tech gremlin. No. It had to be casual. Light. Maybe even… poetic. Something a little strange, just enough to itch at the back of Will's brain. The wind stirred around him, brushing the leaves above, cold against his neck. He started typing.

James

'Funny how easy it is to vanish when you stop looking up.'

He paused. Read it back. It was soft. Harmless on the surface. But it wasn't harmless, not at all. James smiled to himself, slow and private. A little smirk pressed into the corner of his mouth as he hit *send.* He didn't expect a reply right away. He never did. But the phone vibrated barely a minute later.

Distraction

'You're such a weirdo. I missed this. [laughing emoji]'

James stared at the screen. That emoji. That laugh. He reread it twice. Three times. The warmth in it. The trust. Like Will had no idea what James had just done. Like he hadn't walked straight past the man who'd been strung up in a tree like some deranged predator with a WiFi signal. James' chest tightened. He hadn't lost him. Not yet. Not even close. Maybe Will *did* know. Maybe he *liked* the weirdness. Or maybe- *God* - maybe Will was just that soft. That unaware.

Didn’t matter.

James typed again, fingers calm now.

James

‘Missed you too. You around at some point?’

And then he locked his phone, pocketed it, and walked home like he wasn’t being eaten alive from the inside. And as he walked away, branches clawing at his coat like hands begging him to stop, James realised: if God watched his children like this, maybe the Devil was just a man who loved too hard.

Chapter End Notes

For me, writing chapter three was like the turning point. It's where the power slips, ever so slightly, where Will becomes what seems like a shadow puppeteer and James starts dancing in his own strings.

I didn't want to show Will confronting anything, but he just starts subtly responding. Does he know anything? No. But James doesn't know that. Everythings ALMOST normal, but just a little too quiet. A little too intentional.

There's James doubting himself, and instead of facing that doubt, he spins it tighter into delusion. Classic unreliable narrator. Sickening. There is a subtle shift from surveillance into performance and suddenly James is chasing a narrative he didn't create.

But hey, he can try to control it.

Thank you for reading!

Look Back At Me

Chapter Summary

I: 'Sinnerman' - Nina Simone
II: 'Me and the Devil' - Soap&Skin
III: 'Hammerman and I' - Innova
IIII: 'Hotel' - Montell Fish

Chapter Notes

I wanted to make this chapter feel like a ballroom dance but, like, with knives. I hope that came through.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I

The light in Will's kitchen flickered on like a signal flare- delicate, golden, predictable. James was already in place. He didn't sit anymore when he watched. He leaned. Elbow pressed against the windowsill, chin perched on his palm, gaze locked like a scope. His own apartment stayed mostly dark, lit only by the blue light of his phone and the eerie glow from the hallway CCTV feed on his tablet. Across the way, Will moved through his flat with a lazy rhythm. T-shirt hanging loose, hair scruffy and unbrushed. He grabbed a glass and opened the fridge. Everything he did was choreographed, the kind of casual choreography that only came from repetition. A routine. James liked routines.

He tilted his head slightly. One thought looped in his skull like a lazy, curling vine: *He hasn't texted again.*

That one last message- "Missed you too. You around at some point?"- had sparked in James like the flick of a lighter in gasoline. But then? Silence. The silence wasn't just absence. It was a threat. It was *potential* . James felt like a wire strung tight across two buildings, just waiting for someone to pluck it and make it scream.

Otto nudged his leg, tail flicking against his ankle, but James didn't move. He tapped his phone. Opened Instagram. Maybe he should customise his account? Make it appealing… make it *him* . Tonight, watching Will drink straight from the glass like he hadn't noticed the condensation soaking into his shirt collar- was a night thriving with the basis for terrible ideas. If Will wanted distance, fine. But he was curious. James had felt it in the way Will lingered. Looked. Left that number. Walked across his kitchen. The signs were *there* .

Curiosity was a door.

James just had to knock.

He opened Instagram and stared at the empty profile screen like it was a crime scene- blank, waiting, clinical. The "change username" button practically leered at him. He didn't have a personal one, it was just some concoction of numbers and letters. He never needed one. He

watched, he didn't perform. But tonight? Tonight he needed to be *seen* . James tapped. A new name. A new little mirror for Will to find himself in.

The empty, awaiting box blinked at him. Judgemental. Hungry.

He typed: @watchingglass. Taken. Of course. He backspaced slowly, replacing it with @jamesobsession. Who was he kidding? That's too obvious, far too serial-killer manifesto. He snorted under his breath then deleted it. Otto meowed once in the background, as if to say 'get a grip'. James tried again: @windowtherapy. No. That sounded like a rehab centre for emotionally unavailable architecture students. Backspace. Backspace. Backspace. He rubbed his thumb along the corner of his phone like it might spark ideas. What did he want Will to see?

Something casual. Something soft. Something clever, but not too clever. Not the kind of clever that made you feel like you were being toyed with- even though that's exactly what this was. Maybe something more him. Something grounded. But *inviting* . He typed again: @veryquietanimal. Ugh. Pretentious. That sounded like he wrote poetry about clouds and his ex-boyfriend. Backspace.

James leaned back and stared out the window. Will was still in the kitchen, phone in hand now. His thumb was scrolling. Maybe through Spotify. Maybe through messages. Maybe- maybe, soon, through *this* . James' brain buzzed. He tried: @jm_obsessions. No. Red flag city. That sounded like the username of a guy who gets banned from forums twice a week.

He gave himself a moment. He breathed and thought of Will's laugh, the way it bubbled up in that café like a secret between friends. He thought of Will's fingers brushing his when he would eventually come over. He thought of how he'd paused outside his door just yesterday. He'd looked up, as if he'd sensed something.

James smirked. He typed slowly, deliberately: @jamesmarriott. The system didn't blink. No red text. No "this username is taken". Because, of course, it wasn't. He hadn't claimed it yet. It felt… simple. Honest. Like the kind of thing someone would click on because they thought they knew him. It gave him presence. Gave him shape. And most of all? It was bait disguised as vulnerability. Will couldn't avoid *him.* He couldn't miss James being his 'authentic self'. He hit confirm.

And just like that, James Marriott was now live on Instagram.

“Let’s see if you’re still curious, sweetheart,” he murmured, watching Will flick the kitchen light off and walk out of frame.

He uploaded a story next- just a blurry photo of the city street outside his window, glowing with orange light. No caption. No location.

Let Will figure it out. Let Will *wonder*.

Because James wasn’t just watching anymore. He was *inviting the gaze back* .

James stared at his own new profile: zero posts, one story, no followers. Clean. Deceptive. Like a crime scene scrubbed with bleach. He added a profile photo- just the lower half of his body with Otto sitting on his lap bathed in soft shadow. Inviting but vague. If Will saw it, he’d pause. Wonder. That was the goal. That was always the goal.

James leaned back into the window light, casting a glance toward Will’s building. His window was still dark, curtains half-drawn. He opened the Instagram search bar and typed in Will’s username. There he was.

The profile photo was obnoxiously low-effort. His display name was lowercase: “will” with no emoji next to it. Of course. James let out a breathy, dry laugh. They had no mutual followers, which meant that if James followed, it wouldn’t slip under the radar. He stared at the “Follow” button like it had teeth.

A thousand questions licked the edges of his mind. What would Will think if he saw it? Would he smile? Would he panic? Would he show a friend and joke about it like it meant nothing? Would he *ignore* it?

James’ thumb hovered over the button. The air in his apartment felt heavier now, like even Otto had stopped breathing. He hadn’t seen Will in person since the café. Since the text.

Since the pause at the door. Everything had tilted sideways since then. Time had turned strange. James felt like a stretched rubber band- one poke away from snapping.

He imagined it: Will, opening his notifications. Seeing James Marriott wanted access. Clicking on his profile. Seeing the story. The name. The photo. Realising.

James closed his eyes.

God, it would be so easy. One press. One flick. Just a single stupid action and the message would be loud, simple, unmistakable: *I see you* . But would it be too much? James wasn't the kind of man who begged to be seen. He engineered it, orchestrated it. Let them come to him, wide-eyed and curious. He didn't… chase. He set the scene and let them follow the trail like good little moths. But Will… Will wasn't like them. Will had left a number. Will had smiled. Will had *sat with him* .

And then Will had disappeared.

James blinked at the screen. He tapped his finger, once, just beneath the "Follow" button.

Then pulled away, as if relishing in the feeling of what it *could* feel like. No, not yet. Not like this. This had to feel natural, Will had to want it- he had to choose it. If James knocked too loudly, Will might close the door for good. So instead- he took a screenshot, just the profile. Just for now.

Then backed out. Back to his own profile. Back to that quiet story sitting there like bait in a lake. Across the street, a light flicked on, a shadow moved. James leaned against the cold glass of his window, breath fogging it slightly. He whispered, "Come find me."

If Will saw the profile- really saw it- James wasn't sure what would unravel first: Will's curiosity or his caution. He imagined it unfolding like a film reel, slow and deliberate. Will, curled up on his sofa, thumb dragging lazily across his screen, mind half-present. Then his brows would lift. That flicker of recognition in his eyes, like a match being struck. James could see the pause, the hesitation, the second of breath caught between his ribs. Maybe he'd squint, tap the profile, watch the story- eyes scanning James' picture, the curve of his hips beneath the feline, the intentionally vague aura of it all. Maybe he'd laugh. Or bite his lip. Or screenshot it and send it to some faceless friend with a message like, *is this who i think it is?*

But most of all, James wondered- would he come closer? Would he message? Would he ask if it was him, if it was real, if the posted story meant anything at all? Or would he pretend not to notice, letting James rot in digital silence? That was the unbearable part: the not knowing. James could handle rejection. What he couldn't stand was the liminal space between being seen and being ignored—where everything teetered on the edge of being *almost* enough.

James blinked down at his phone, still half-caught in his imagined reel of Will finding his account, when the vibration cut through the air like a heartbeat. He glanced down, expecting some boring update- a forgettable shipping confirmation, probably. It wasn't.

Distraction

'So when are you free?'

That was it. Five words. Five goddamn words. Like it was nothing. Like the silence hadn't stretched for a week, like James hadn't been sitting with the ghost of that threadbare conversation since the last "Night, James." Like Will had never even *left* the chat. James stared at it and reread it. His thumb hovered uselessly. Was he free? He was *always* free. Pathetically, tragically, utterly free whenever Will so much as blinked in his direction. The real question was- was this bait? Was this a trap? Or had Will always been there, phone in hand, reading everything, waiting to pounce at the exact moment James let his guard drop?

James typed. Then he stopped, tossed the phone onto the short and unassuming coffee beside him, and let out a slow breath like he was bleeding air. Otto meowed in protest from where he'd been sleeping, rudely awakened by the soft chaos.

"When am I free?" James muttered, eyes on the cracked ceiling. "For you, Will? I'd cancel *God* ."

Instead of replying, James moved- slowly, like it hurt. Like standing would snap the moment into something irreversible. He dragged himself to peer out of the window, hands sinking onto his hips. He paced a few times before planting himself back onto the window seat, legs curling up beneath him like he was trying to disappear into the frame. His forehead pressed against the cool glass, eyes fixed on Will's window like it might blink back at him. He felt restless. Like the answer was hidden somewhere between those drawn curtains and the glow of a hallway light. He pulled his knees tighter to his chest, the way a child does when the

world gets too big to bear- like he was shielding himself from something brutal and invisible and closing in.

And then the thought came, with the sickening weight of truth: *Why am I so ready to reply when he can vanish for days?* It echoed in his skull, rolling over itself like waves swallowing waves, like one poisonous syllable swallowing the next. Why did one message flip his heart upside down like a switchblade? Why did he sit in this stupid little corner of the world waiting like some Victorian wife watching the sea for a ship that never planned to dock? What did Will do to him, exactly, to make his silence feel like punishment and his attention feel like salvation?

It wasn't fair. It wasn't rational. It wasn't *safe* .

But it was *him* - Will, with the glinting eyes and the light touch, the delayed messages that hit harder than any slap. James had read every word he'd ever sent like scripture. He studied the gaps between them. Measured the pauses like beats in a symphony. And now, after a week of nothing, of *dust* - he texts like nothing happened. And James? James wants to run. To flee. But also… he wants to *melt.* To crumble. To drop his phone in a bowl of holy water and reply with a fucking heart emoji just to feel the rush of being seen again.

He was *insane* , wasn't he? Not in the 'fun, edgy, misunderstood genius' way. In the dangerously malleable way. The kind of unhinged that made your own name sound foreign in your mouth. He wanted to dig inside Will's head and live there, rotting between thoughts. He wanted to crawl beneath Will's skin and stay. But instead, he just sat there- knees to chest, chest too tight, teeth clenched like maybe he could bite the feelings into submission.

All for a text.

One. Fucking. Text.

His hand twitched before he even gave it permission. That same old traitorous movement, reaching for the phone like it was muscle memory, like it wasn't him anymore- just nerves and need and compulsion dressed up in skin. He hesitated. He *tried* to hesitate, at least, made some weak little show of restraint, like maybe if he breathed slow enough, he'd earn the right to pretend this wasn't pathetic. That he wasn't sitting cross-legged on a window seat like

some tragic Victorian orphan, vibrating with the desperate urge to send a message to a boy who clearly didn't live on the same timeline as him. But even then- he reached.

He picked up the phone, fingers curling around the familiar weight with all the reverence of a man touching something sacred and slightly cursed. He didn't open the conversation straight away. That would've been too much, too telling. He thumbed past a few useless apps, flicked through nothing, stared at his home screen like maybe a notification would pop up and save him from himself. It didn't. He rested the phone on his knees, leaning back against the frame of the window as if the wall would cool him. So he gave in.

He tapped the messages. There it was. So casual. So cruel in its calmness. Like he hadn't spent the last seven nights pacing the floor, chewing the inside of his cheek raw, replaying their café conversation like a scene from a film that refused to end. Like James hadn't scrolled back through every word they'd ever exchanged, checking for double meanings, decoding the weight of every damn emoji. Like Will wasn't the kind of boy who could vanish into thin air and come back like it was nothing, like time bent differently around him.

He held the phone in both hands now, like it might slip through his fingers if he didn't treat it like glass. And he *wanted* to reply- God, he wanted to reply. Wanted to type something dry and witty and casual enough to hide the fact that he'd waited days for this. That this was the highlight of his week. That he'd spiralled in a tree over this man. That he had cameras recording footage of Will's door and surrounding area just to feel closer.

But his mind was spiralling again, his thumb hovering over the keyboard like it couldn't quite make contact. Because if he replied too fast, it was obvious. If he waited too long, he was playing a game he wasn't built to win. If he said too little, he'd lose him. If he said too much, he'd scare him.

And underneath it all, one terrible, howling truth: James Marriott had never wanted anything more than he wanted to be on Will's mind right now.

He typed slower than he meant to. Every word was weighed, dissected, smoothed out, then typed again. He deleted. Rewrote. Deleted again. His breathing had gone shallow, chest tight like the air itself didn't want to be part of this moment in case it went wrong. Finally, he sent back a reply.

James

‘You can come over, if you want. I’m in.’

The second it was gone, he stared at the screen like maybe he could reach in and drag the message back out by the throat. Too forward? Too open? Did it sound desperate? He hadn't said a time. Should he have said a time? Should he have said *no* , just to see if Will would chase? It was late- almost dark- did that matter? But before the spiral could really take him under, the reply lit up his screen.

Distraction

‘I was hoping you’d say that.’

Six words. Easy. Effortless. With a tiny flick of flirtation buried under all that Will-casualness. James read it once, then again. Then a third time, just to be sure it still meant what he thought it meant. And then- slowly- he smiled. One of those small, private smiles that didn’t reach the surface of his face so much as bloom quietly behind his eyes. His chest felt tight again, but in a different way now. Like his ribs were making room for something.

James hovered, thumb twitching over the keyboard. He copied the address from his notes app- it was already saved there, for moments like this. Moments he didn’t actually believe would happen. He sent it. He added nothing else. No emoji. No “see you soon.” No nervous ha-ha to downplay the weight of it. He just sent it. Then he turned the phone screen-down on the table like it had offended him.

As if not looking made him cooler. As if Will's reply would mean less if he didn’t watch it arrive.

He stood abruptly, pacing a short loop around the kitchen and back again, already seeing the apartment like Will would see it: the stack of mugs on the counter, the empty cans by the sink, the jacket he hadn’t hung up properly draped like a corpse over the back of the sofa. The kitchen floor had something sticky on it. And the cat hair on the rug- *fuck,* there was a lot of cat hair on the rug. He ran a hand through his hair, more anxious than composed now.

“Right,” he muttered, already pulling a tea towel from the oven handle like it was a weapon. “We’re doing this.”

II

The doorbell rang, shrill and immediate, splitting the low hum of the flat like a scalpel. James flinched- really flinched- his whole body jerking like a puppet with its strings yanked too tight. The reaction was instant and visceral, completely out of character, and that alone annoyed him almost as much as the ringing itself. He didn't flinch. He didn't do sudden movements. He anticipated things. That was the whole point of watching. That was the point of control.

But his nerves had been rattling since he sent that address.

The phone had buzzed once after- Will's simple "On my way"- and then nothing. That absence had left him suspended in a grotesque sort of purgatory, unsure whether to sit still or pace the floor until it cracked. Now, the doorbell had cut through that tension like a gunshot, and he was still vibrating with the aftershock as he approached the door.

James adjusted the hem of his shirt, wiped his palms on his jeans as if that might erase the sticky sweat. Otto was sitting silently near the shoe rack, tail wrapped around his paws, eyes wide with feline judgement. James looked down at him briefly. "You could've warned me," he muttered. He opened the door.

And there he was.

Will.

Alive. Solid. Not filtered through glass or pixels. Real, in that casual, devastating way that made James feel like his entire body was out of sync with itself- like his bones didn't belong to his skin. Will looked good. Disgustingly good. Sweater sleeves shoved up his forearms, collarbones peeking from the neckline like he'd just rolled out of bed, hair still tousled and half-wet from whatever gel or shower or storm he'd walked through. His expression was a mix of smugness and disbelief, and he didn't even wait to be invited in before speaking.

“Did you realise how *fucking close* we live?”

James blinked, momentarily stunned- not by the question, but by how normal it sounded. How offhand. Like this wasn’t some significant moment, like Will wasn’t standing in the centre of everything James had ever wanted.

“Yeah,” James said too quickly. Then, trying to fix it with something smoother, “I mean- I’d noticed. Once or twice.”

Will raised an eyebrow, and James stepped aside wordlessly, allowing him in. Will walked past him without hesitation, already looking around, already absorbing the space in that annoyingly aware way of his. James shut the door, trying not to visibly brace himself.

The apartment was clean now- too clean. Sanitised in that neurotic, defensive way that screamed effort. The evidence of him had been rearranged, dusted, disguised. Books realigned, mugs hidden, the weird scratch on the wall behind the sofa covered with a conveniently placed art print he didn’t even like. But Will still moved through the space like a critic at a gallery.

“So…” Will turned, eyes scanning a shelf stacked with thick, severe titles. He tilted his head, reading. “‘ *Surveillance in the Modern Age: Ethics and Obsession* .’ That’s… cheery.”

James winced internally. Fuck. Missed that one, probably should have hidden his collection. He gave a tight-lipped smile, too dry to be real. “Light reading.”

Will turned back to him, lips curled with amusement. “Do you *always* alphabetise by subject?”

“Only the ones that could get me arrested.”

Will laughed. Not a polite laugh- a real one. James felt it land in his chest like a fist wrapped in silk. And then Will knelt, out of nowhere, and extended a hand to Otto, who had cautiously

padded over to investigate this new human. James held his breath. Otto was notoriously discerning. People had tried to win him over and failed- friends, acquaintances, unfortunate delivery guys.

But Otto gave Will a slow blink. Will smiled wider and scratched under his chin. James was going to throw himself into the fucking Thames.

“Iced coffee?” he blurted, already moving toward the kitchen before Will could reply. “I was gonna make some.”

“Sure,” Will called after him, still crouched. “Is Otto single?”

James snorted. “Tragically.”

The kitchen felt smaller now. Like it had shrunk under the pressure of hosting something *real* . He moved with efficiency that bordered on neurotic, ice clinking into glasses, coffee over concentrate, milk, a stir so precise it looked rehearsed. He handed Will the drink, and their fingers touched just slightly- another spark. Will’s eyes lingered on him for a beat too long.

They settled on the couch, an awkward little gap between them like they were strangers on a first date in a dentist’s waiting room.

“You seriously live opposite me,” Will said again, turning slightly to look out James' window. James followed his gaze. From this angle, Will’s apartment was perfectly visible. Had always been perfectly visible. A straight line. One open curtain away from theatre seating.

James tried to smile, but it felt too tight on his face. “Yeah,” he said. “Bit funny, isn’t it?”

Will didn’t answer for a moment. He just sipped the coffee. Then, slowly: “So… you must’ve seen me before we actually met, right?”

The room dipped in temperature. James' stomach turned over. “Once or twice,” he said, aiming for breezy. “Didn’t know it was you at the time.”

Will looked at him, skeptical- but not harsh. Amused. “You sure?”

James met his gaze. “Positive.”

The silence was sticky, stretched taut across the room like cling film no one had the guts to pierce. Will sat still, his posture deceptively relaxed, one hand absently running across Otto’s back as his gaze drifted- first to the bookshelf again, to those damning, over-researched spines with titles that screamed *guilt,* then to the window, to the neat little square of his own apartment visible just beyond the glass, and then, finally, slowly, to James. The flickers of his gaze weren’t random. They had rhythm, weight, deliberation, and James could feel the heat of it start to rise in his chest, the sweat threatening to bead again at his temples. Will didn’t speak. He just watched, his lip twitching in a way that could’ve been amusement or calculation or something worse, and James hated- *hated* - how unsure he suddenly was of the meaning behind it. His fingers tightened slightly around his coffee glass, the condensation bleeding into his skin. Will didn’t need to say anything. The act of thinking- *that* was loud enough. And James could see it all in the subtle movements: the way Will’s tongue pressed against his cheek in contemplation, the shallow breath held at the top of his chest, the tension in his jaw. There was something winding in him, slowly, like a clock being turned. James wanted to fill the silence, wanted to unspool a distraction, wanted to shrink under the weight of being seen- but he didn’t dare move. Because Will was thinking. And if he was thinking, it meant he knew *something* .

Will let the silence drag for just one moment longer- long enough to make James ache with it- before his expression shifted, just slightly, just enough. His mouth tugged into something that resembled a smile, crooked and casual, and he raised his glass to his lips again for another sip, then looked over at James with that maddeningly unreadable glint in his eye.

“You weren’t lying about your iced coffee, by the way,” he said, voice light, as though the last thirty seconds hadn’t felt like an interrogation with no words. “They’re actually... stupidly good. Like, dangerously good. Addictive in a way that feels a little manipulative.”

He took another sip, leaning back on the sofa with a sigh, playing it cool- too cool. And James, still holding his breath without even realising it, finally let his chest drop a little. A shift. A deflection. A lightness that made him feel almost safe again. Almost.

James blinked, slow and deliberate, like his body needed a second to catch up to the reset in tone. That one lighthearted sentence from Will- charming, offhand, almost mocking- should've soothed something in him. Should've unclenched the knot of dread in his chest. But it didn't.

Because underneath the compliment was something sharper. And James wasn't stupid enough to miss that.

Still, it was enough. Enough space for him to step back into himself.

His spine straightened. His jaw eased, then tightened again- but this time in resolve, not tension. He leaned forward slightly, one elbow resting on his knee, fingers wrapped loosely around his glass, gaze cool as he let the room settle around them. His room. His space. His narrative.

He smiled- not the soft, nervous twitch he'd offered at the door, but the slow, deliberate curve that reminded people they were orbiting him now, not the other way around. "Well," he said, voice lower now, "I do have a bit of a reputation to uphold."

His eyes flicked to the books on the shelf, then back to Will.

"And I make good coffee," he added, tone airily smug, as if that explained everything. As if the surveillance manuals and the fact Will's flat was right across from his window weren't the heaviest things in the room. Because this was his game again. Will might've thrown a curve, but James could bend it back into form. He always did.

And Will- bright-eyed, lounging, drinking the drink James made for him, sitting where James had placed him- was still, ultimately, right where James wanted him.

James let his gaze drift toward the window again- large, clean, perfectly framed- then back to Will with a twitch of a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. His fingers tapped against

the glass of his iced coffee, slow, absent-minded, like he was thinking it through before saying anything. But of course, he already had the line queued. He always did.

"Guess we can wave at each other now," he said lightly, feigning cheerfulness but with that unmistakable undertone- low, amused, knowing. "Maybe hold up little signs like it's lockdown again. 'Nice hoodie.' 'Close your curtains.' 'Stop ignoring my texts.'"

His eyes lingered on Will's reaction, waiting for the flicker, the shift in posture- and when Will looked up to respond, when he opened his mouth to fire something back, James dragged his gaze over him in full. From the slope of Will's shoulders, to the shape of his thighs against the edge of the sofa, to the vein twitching faintly in his forearm where it rested on the cushion. Not subtle. Not embarrassed. A quiet, invasive inspection.

He let the moment hang in the air, lips parted like he might say something else- but didn't. He just held that look, calm and idle and cutting.

The message was clear: *you're in my space, sweetheart. My rules.*

James took a sip of his drink, never breaking eye contact. The shift in power was so slight it might've gone unnoticed to anyone else, but it was there- tilting, slow, like the creak of a seesaw right before it slams.

Will didn't flinch. That was the thing about him- he didn't retreat. He just cocked an eyebrow, slow, deliberate, and let a smirk spread like honey across his face. His fingers curled tighter around the glass of his iced coffee, condensation dripping lazily onto the coaster James had insisted on placing beneath it.

"Oh yeah?" he said, voice velveted with sarcasm, eyes narrowed in playful challenge. "Guess I'll have to start dressing for the occasion. Wouldn't want to disappoint my audience."

He let that simmer between them, just long enough for it to sting and spark. Then he took a sip of his drink, matching James' earlier rhythm like a mirror, like a dare. "Hope you're good at sign language. Or is that not the kind of hand action you're used to giving at your window?"

The grin was innocent. The tone wasn't. And James, for once, blinked first.

James stared at him, the smirk still dripping from Will's lips like it belonged there, like it had always belonged there- and something behind James' ribs twisted, like a pulled thread, taut and humming. Of course. *Of course* this was a game to him. Will had walked in here not as a guest, not as someone blindly impressed or vaguely unsettled, but as a player who'd already studied the board before making his first move. He'd been quiet these last few days for a reason- not because he was scared, not because he was unsure- but because he had known exactly what was coming. He had been saving it. Storing it. Like a fox baring its teeth only when the trap had already closed.

James could see it now, as clear as the view through that fucking window: this wasn't a conversation, this wasn't innocent. This was war cloaked in compliments and witty remarks, flirtation used like ammunition, glances shot like arrows. This was Will stepping into his flat with his chin tilted up just enough to test the air. Will, who, *maybe,* had watched James watching him. Will, who, *maybe,* was now daring James to admit it.

And James- God, James wasn't going to lose.

He leaned back, fingers loose around his glass, his smile soft and thin as a blade. His mind was already three moves ahead, dissecting every microexpression Will gave him, calculating, tasting the power shift and clawing it back, one heartbeat at a time. Will could play charming, but James had made an art form of manipulation- and in his space, under his roof, behind his walls, it would be *him* pulling the strings.

Let him flirt. Let him challenge. James would let him dangle in the illusion of control for just a little longer.

"You know," he said smoothly, "you should be careful how often you wander into the homes of strangers. You never really know who's watching."

He watched it land. That perfect flicker- small but sharp- as Will's lashes lifted slightly, his lips parting like he was about to respond, but nothing came. Just a half-second stall, a glitch in his rhythm. That was all James needed. Not panic, not fear- just uncertainty. That's what

made it satisfying. Because Will didn't laugh it off. He didn't quip back immediately. Instead, he looked away. He looked at Otto. At the coffee. At anything but James.

It was the reaction of someone who didn't know. Who didn't realise there were cameras tucked in trees and stairwells and light fixtures, who didn't see the strings even as they were tugged. Will wasn't playing this game from the same position- he *thought* they were equals.

James smiled, slow and sick and sweet. *He was still holding the reins.*

He then tilted his head and cracked the mood with a casual shrug, voice tipping into something warm, amused, and deliberately harmless.

"But what do I know?" he added, a smile curling just a touch too wide. "We're not strangers. And my cat's claimed you now, so I guess that makes you ours or something."

As if on cue, Otto stretched luxuriously across Will's lap, tail flicking with contentment, clearly having picked his side. Will laughed- genuinely this time- and scratched behind the cat's ears.

"Oh, I see," he said lightly, "so this was all just an elaborate ploy to find Otto a babysitter."

James laughed too. The room shifted. The air, which moments ago had been thick with that unspoken duel, now softened. James could feel it- the way the balance had tilted again, how the temperature responded to him. He controlled the current, the ebb and flow of every breath between them. He had dragged the atmosphere back into his grip with nothing more than a line and a smile.

Will leaned back slightly, cradling the coffee in both hands, eyes flicking to James with a crooked little grin. They were chatting again, just two acquaintances bonding over iced coffee and a possessive cat. That simmering unease had been dismissed, brushed under the rug like it had never existed.

And James? He basked in it. Every flicker of Will's expression, every casual movement, every word- they were all dancing to his tune now. Will was back to where he needed to be, and James melted in the atmosphere of the other man being visibly *comfortable* now. This was exactly what the plot had envisioned, and James was simply making sure the pages were read in the correct order. Will may have fought back, but now he was back in his place.

Will's gaze wandered again, this time softer, less analytical. He took in the clean edges of the furniture, the minimalist shelves lined with books arranged by height and tone, the small framed prints on the wall that looked too carefully chosen to be accidental. His eyes rested for a second on the untouched record player, then flicked back to James with a tilt of his head.

"You know," he said, stretching his legs a little under Otto's weight, "your flat's weirdly… clinical. But also kinda cosy? Like a dentist that makes good tea."

James raised a brow. "A dentist?"

Will grinned, cradling the glass in both hands. "Yeah. It's clean. Precise. Everything's in the right place, and I feel like if I moved a cushion I'd be escorted out." He gestured vaguely to the coffee table, where James had placed their drinks on coasters with near-military symmetry. "But there's also the cat, and the lighting's warm, and your coffee's not half bad, so…"

James let out a soft, sarcastic hum. "High praise from a man who just compared my home to a sterile medical facility."

Will's grin widened. "A *nice* sterile medical facility."

James leaned against the back of the sofa, eyes flicking over Will in the soft lighting. "You're lucky Otto likes you."

Will glanced down at the cat, now fully melted into his lap. "He's the best part of your interior design, not gonna lie."

Will leaned back on the sofa like it was his, legs crossed lazily, one arm draped across the cushion as Otto settled into the crook of his other elbow. He looked too at home, which of course meant he was up to something. His gaze drifted again, scanning the flat like he was mapping it- books stacked at perfect angles, cables coiled neatly, a rug that sat exactly central under the coffee table. No dust. No chaos. Not even a mug out of place.

"So," he said eventually, eyes landing back on James with mock intrigue. "What kind of trauma are we talking?"

James blinked. "Excuse me?"

Will gestured around them with the dramatic flair of a tour guide. "All of this. The minimalism, the clinically clean surfaces, the painfully organised bookshelf. I mean- your tea towels are colour-matched. That's not regular behaviour, James. That's... inner-child-on-life-support behaviour."

James raised an eyebrow, feigning neutrality while gripping his iced coffee just a little tighter. "I like order."

"You like control," Will corrected, grinning like he'd just hit something vital. "Which is fine. Respect. But I'm just saying- you've got emotionally repressed, possibly ex-private school energy. Were you one of those kids with a Latin motto stitched on your blazer?"

James scoffed, because he wasn't going to *dignify* that with a real answer. "So what, this is therapy now?"

Will shrugged. "Think of it as a gift. A thank-you for inviting me in"

James fixed him with a look. "You give terrible gifts."

“Oh come on,” Will said, laughing. “You’re telling me this doesn’t scream ‘boarding school dorm room trauma’? I bet you’ve got a designated drawer for your socks *and* one for your regrets.”

James shook his head, but the smile was tugging at the corner of his mouth despite himself.

Will’s gaze drifted again- this time towards the window. His expression changed, just slightly, the smirk slipping off for something more pensive. “Your flat’s so well kept,” he said. “Seriously. Your plants look like they get love letters and a full water schedule.”

James tilted his head with mock offense. “So now I’m a repressed grammar school kid with attachment issues?”

“I mean,” Will sipped his coffee with a shrug, “if the trauma fits.”

“And what, your flat’s the vision of mental health, is it?”

Will snorted. “My flat is 60% dying plants and 40% takeaway containers. Mental health disaster. If your place is the therapist’s office, mine’s the patient.”

James laughed- actually laughed this time, teeth and all. “You’ve got to water them, Will. The plants, I mean.”

“Look,” Will said defensively, “they don’t tell you they’re thirsty. They just sit there and vibe until one day they’re crispy and dead. It’s a flawed system.”

James leaned on his elbow, placing his coffee on the table. “Sounds like a metaphor for your dating history.”

Will gasped dramatically. “Okay, rude. You know nothing about my dating history.”

James raised an eyebrow. “Don’t I?”

There was a pause- just a second- and Will tilted his head, lips twitching into a small smile. “Are you always this… invasive?”

“Only with people I like,” James said, tone casual, smooth. “And who voluntarily come into my apartment knowing I’ve got more than one book about surveillance on the shelf.”

Will gave him a long, unreadable look. Then smiled wider. “So this is what you’re like when you flirt.”

James smiled back, slow and orchestrated, like pulling a blade from its sheath. “No, Will,” he said, voice low. “This is me being nice.”

Will snorted at James’ last line, leaning forward to place his empty glass on the table, Otto still curled like royalty in his lap. “You know,” he said, the tone light, too light, “for someone so composed and caffeinated, you’ve got big lonely boy energy.”

James didn’t want to convey how he was truly feeling in that moment. “Sorry?”

Will shrugged, a cheeky grin breaking across his face. “You heard me. This whole ‘nice host, iced coffee, adopt my cat, sit on my expensive sofa’ act? I’m starting to think it’s just a really elaborate cry for help. You’re not charming, James- you’re *starved* .”

There was a beat. A flicker. Something that passed behind James’ eyes like a shadow at dusk- quick, unreadable, not quite anger but something rawer. For a second, his smile faltered. But then-

“Starved?” James echoed, tilting his head as if tasting the word. “Darling, if I’m starved, you’re on your knees begging to be devoured.”

Will's mouth opened slightly, a laugh threatening- but he didn't say anything.

James smiled sweetly, venom sheathed just beneath the surface. "You came to my door. You sat on my sofa. My cat's already in love with you, and you haven't stopped looking around like you're searching for something to unravel. So remind me- who's lonely again?"

Will didn't speak. His mouth twitched like it might- like a comeback was loading- but nothing came. His eyes darted to the side, unfocused, and for a beat too long, he just… sat there. Silent. Stilled. His hand, previously stroking lazy circles into Otto's fur, now hovered slightly mid-air, unsure of where it belonged. James watched it all unfold with a simmering fascination, like a scientist observing a tremor under glass. Did he go too far? Was it too sharp, too precise? That little dig, that sharp turn of the blade- was it a misstep? But then- subtle, so subtle- Will shifted. The roll of his shoulders loosened. His spine straightened. His lips twitched not in defence but in something softer, almost indulgent. And James felt it, like lightning grounding in the pit of his stomach: Will wasn't retreating. He was reacting. He was *receptive* . Oh. *Oh* . Maybe that wasn't discomfort. Maybe that was desire laced with disbelief. Maybe Will *liked* being tugged like that. Maybe he liked knowing someone could outpace him. And just like that, James smirked, luxuriating in the silence like a predator realising its prey isn't running, it's circling.

James let the silence breathe for another heartbeat- just enough to let Will stew, to let that heat settle between them- then exhaled a soft, amused breath and tilted his head.

"God," he muttered, shaking his head like he was the reasonable one in the room, "if this is how you act when someone offers you coffee, remind me to never cook for you. You'd probably propose."

His voice was warm again, teasing, pulling back just enough to make the sting feel like flirtation. His fingers drummed lazily against his knee as he looked at Will through half-lidded eyes, a smirk playing at the edge of his mouth.

"Relax," he added, smug, "I'm not *always* that mean. Sometimes I'm *insufferably* charming."

Will huffed a quiet laugh, head tipping back against the sofa cushion as if the smirk James had offered physically pushed him there. “Insufferably charming,” he repeated, like it amused him more than it should. “You sound so sure of yourself, it’s actually kind of terrifying.”

His grin lingered a second longer, and for a moment, it felt easy again- like the tension had folded into something bearable, something familiar. Will reached to scratch behind Otto’s ears, the cat melting into his palm like it had never known a better hand. But then he glanced toward the window- beyond it, the faint spill of white light reflected from his flat window as the moon shone- and his smile faded into something softer, a little more reluctant.

“Shit,” he murmured, straightening with a stretch that pulled his sweater taut across his chest, “it’s later than I thought. I should probably head back before my flat dies of neglect. Again.”

He glanced sideways, eyes catching on James' like he was checking something- some unspoken expression, some invisible current- and then stood up slowly, brushing nonexistent creases from his jeans.

“I didn’t mean to stay this long,” he added, voice quiet, apologetic in that stupid polite way he always had when he was about to leave.

“You don’t need to apologise,” James said lightly, walking him toward the door. “Seriously. It’s… good, actually. Now you know where I live.” His eyes flicked sideways, the corners of his mouth quirking up. “Cuts the mystery in half.”

Will snorted as he shrugged his hoodie back on. “Yeah, mystery’s dead. Tragic.” He paused in the doorway, half-in, half-out, and then looked over his shoulder at James with a smirk. “Still can’t believe we live literally opposite. Like, I can see your curtains from my bed. That’s genuinely hilarious.”

James tilted his head. “Is it?”

Will just grinned, stepped out onto the landing, and gave a little wave as he started down the stairs. “Night, James.”

The door clicked shut.

And James stood in the hallway, in the silence, in the echo of Will’s footsteps fading away like static dissolving into air.

III

It’s late morning when James posts it.

A quiet photo taken at the café- *their* café now, in the way shared spaces become shared without ever needing to be discussed. The picture is intentionally casual: the corner of his coffee, a book half open, Otto’s head poking out of his bag on the chair next to him. It’s warm-toned, a little blurry, just filtered enough to look unfiltered. The kind of thing someone stumbles across and thinks, God, I wish I was there.

No caption. Just a timestamp. Ambiguity was the whole point.

He doesn’t check for a while. He wants to pretend he forgot he even posted it- play his own game. But eventually, sitting back at his window seat with one leg curled up to his chest, he gives in. He opens the app, taps the story and swipes up.

One like.

One little red heart.

From a private account. Username obvious enough. Not a burner, clearly. One James recognises immediately, because he’s seen it before. Once, when Will followed him back. Then blocked him. Then unblocked. Then removed the follow. The pattern, the tease. The *fucking game of it all* .

His breath catches. Because Will watched it. *Will.* Watched *him.* And even more: Will liked it. Will made a choice. They don’t even follow each other- but dear God his observation was *enough* . It showed that Will was actively searching for his profile, to see what he’s up to.

James sits there for a second, eyes glued to the screen, chest sparking with heat that blooms up his throat and behind his eyes. His smile is slow, indulgent, almost cruel in its satisfaction.

He is seen. No longer the only one watching. And oh- he *lives* for this.

James' legs are curled again like some oversized child waiting for bedtime stories, only the bedtime story is chaos, and he's the narrator and the monster. The light's dim now, washed blue with early evening, the kind of hour where everything feels a little slower, a little drunker, a little more fragile. He taps the screen. Refreshes the app.

No change. Refreshes again.

Still nothing.

His foot bounces. He tries to pretend he's not anticipating it. Tries to convince himself that he's above this. That it doesn't matter. That he doesn't *need* it. But then his thumb moves of its own accord- *refresh* . Again. Again.

Again. And then- Oh.

Oh.

One new follower.

His throat goes dry. Like something caught in it. Like he swallowed a bee and it's building a hive behind his ribs. He blinks, almost not believing it. But it's there. Right there. The username he already knew like scripture. Because Will has followed him. *Will* . Followed *him.*

James grins before he even means to, a slow, wicked little thing, curling up at the edges of his mouth like smoke. He doesn't even hide it. Just lets it spread as he taps the name, taps follow back. He's public, of course, unlike Will's. Because James Marriott has *nothing* to hide, only things to *show off* . The app glitches for a second. Then- confirmation. He's let into Will's account instantly. Not a minute later. Not even ten seconds. Will was there, waiting. Watching the same way James had been, waiting for James to request to follow him back.

James leans back against the windowpane, exhales like he just finished something exhausting. His head tips to the side, gaze sliding over to the opposite building- Will's windows, lit up faintly behind sheer curtains. He stares, long and low, like maybe if he keeps his eyes steady enough, Will will *feel* it.

The knock hits the door like a damn thunderclap. James freezes mid-breath, that sharp intake slicing through the quiet like a blade. His heart does this ridiculous, unsynchronized jig in his chest- *not usual,* not *him.* He's the one who controls the rhythm, not some unexpected knock. But here it is. He's still human under all the calculated obsession and iced coffee- but then he straightens, smooths his shirt, and opens the door like it's just another day in the warzone.

And there's Will. Standing there, holding something small and wrapped in crumpled brown paper, that easy half-smile lighting up his face like he's about to drop the universe into James' lap. The gift or no gift, it's the *move* that stuns James- because now *Will's* crossing lines, breaking rules, stepping *into* his space.

James blinks, because he's caught off-guard- *Will* making the first move? That's new.

But hell, he doesn't hesitate. He steps aside, lets Will in, heart pounding this time with something dangerously close to... hope?

They slip into the living room, where the dim light from the street lamps outside spills across the couch, casting long shadows that mix with the quiet tension thick enough to cut with a knife. Will sets the small package down on the table and drops onto the couch like he owns the place- like this is their turf now, like James' obsession has grown roots and now blooms in shared space. James watches him, the way Will's eyes catch the light, flicking over the room, over the books, over Otto's sleeping form curled by the radiator. There's a softness there now, a pause between the game and the truth.

Will shrugs, like it's nothing, like he hasn't just flipped James' carefully manicured universe upside down. He nods toward the crumpled brown paper parcel he placed on the table like it's a half-forgotten receipt.

"I was bored," he says casually, fingers raking through his hair. "There's this bakery on the corner, I grabbed a box of pastries because they looked good. But then I realised I had no one to share them with."

His voice lingers on that last part, just a beat too long. James swears he hears it echo in the room like a loaded confession.

"So I thought, I dunno…" Will leans back into the cushions, lazy and soft, like this is his spot now. "I figured I'd climb the stairs, see if you were in. No big deal."

No big deal.

Like James hadn't spent the last few weeks obsessively tracking Will's movements. Like he hadn't orchestrated *entire situations* just to get another laugh, another glance. Like he hadn't

replayed their last interaction a hundred times in his head, dissecting every eyebrow raise and offhand comment like it was gospel. And now here Will is- *offering* himself up like it's nothing. Just bored. Just pastries. Just walked up the stairs.

James stares at him for a second too long, heat blooming under his skin like he's just been touched. He doesn't say anything, doesn't *have* to- because this? This is the thing. The one thing that unzips him down the middle and leaves his insides humming.

He smiles, slow and small. He nods. And then he murmurs- "You make a habit of climbing stairs to seek company, or am I just lucky?"

Will just smirks, reaching for the box with a shrug. "Guess you're just lucky."

And god help him, James *believes* it.

Will tears a flaky corner from the pastry and pops it into his mouth, lips glossed with sugar. The room is quiet except for the gentle crinkle of paper and the occasional sip from a lukewarm coffee James barely remembers making. James watches him chew, gaze flicking between the movement of his jaw and the curve of his throat as he swallows. It's clinical. It's observational. It's absolutely *not* obsessive. Not at all.

Will pulls another piece off, then nudges the box toward James. "Try that one. Custard. It'll ruin you."

James does, more out of obedience than hunger. The crust crackles beneath his fingers, buttery and warm, sweet in a way that sticks to the roof of his mouth like a memory. But it's not the taste that ruins him. Because then Will lets out a sound- *that* sound. A soft, involuntary moan, low and genuine and entirely inappropriate for something that came out of a bakery.

James stills.

That sound rolls through him like smoke under a locked door- slow, invasive, curling around his ribs and pulling. His hand hovers mid-air, halfway to the coffee table, but his brain has stalled. Every part of him catches on that one sliver of noise. Will doesn't notice. Or maybe he does and pretends not to. He leans back, tongue brushing over his bottom lip, smiling with closed eyes like he's just tasted divinity.

James' fingers gently pick up the golden pastry. There's heat crawling up his neck now, and it's not from the coffee. That godforsaken sound. That sinful little noise. It has *no right* sounding like *that* .

He swallows, hard, and when he speaks, his voice is a little too rough around the edges. “Good?”

Will cracks an eye open, all lazy amusement and flaky crumbs on his jumper. “ *So* good. Might be the best thing I’ve had in weeks.”

James’ smile is sharp. Tight.

He isn’t thinking about pastries anymore.

It’s subtle at first. So subtle that James nearly gaslights himself into thinking it’s nothing. A trick of posture, maybe. An accident. But it isn’t. Will shifts again. Just a little.

He’s perched on the edge of the couch, legs crossed lazily at the ankle, the pastry box resting between them like a fragile truce. With each bite, each mindless hum of pleasure as he savours the next mouthful, he shuffles a fraction closer- like gravity is *naturally* pulling him in James’ direction. Like his body hasn’t caught up with the implications of where it’s heading.

James doesn’t move. He *can’t* move. He’s practically braced- spine straight, fingers curled tightly around his thigh, eyes pinned not to Will’s mouth (no, because that’s dangerous) but to the centre of his chest. Neutral. Safe. Kind of. Will wipes a thumb across the corner of his mouth, then licks the sugar off, oblivious to the way James’ jaw clenches at the sight.

The couch creaks softly. Another inch.

James blinks. Calculates. If Will keeps moving at this pace, he’ll be close enough to *touch* in- God- thirty seconds? Maybe less? Maybe he *wants* to be that close?

But Will doesn’t seem aware. Not truly. He’s blissed out on sugar and butter and goddamn carbs, humming low under his breath like the sound isn’t a direct threat to James’ mental wellbeing.

“You’re awfully quiet,” Will murmurs between bites, not even looking up. “You always go mute after good pastry, or is this just a *me* thing?”

James' mouth opens.

Closes.

His voice- when it finally drags itself out of his throat- is deceptively calm. “Just enjoying the view.”

James doesn’t correct him. He lets Will sit there, inching closer, all innocent indulgence and flaky crumbs on his lips, and pretends his skin isn’t itching with the effort it’s taking to stay exactly where he is. Inch by inch, bite by bite. Will moves closer. And James doesn’t breathe.

James doesn’t say a word. He reaches for the pastry box between them and lifts it gently, like it’s delicate, sacred. Will barely glances over, too busy licking sugar from his thumb like he isn’t *devastating* . The box lands on the coffee table with a soft thud. That’s it. The only thing between them is gone.

No buffer. No excuse. Just the couch and the faint hum of tension thickening in the air. Will doesn’t notice. Or pretends not to.

James leans back into the cushions, and nibbles at the custard pastry Will had pointed at earlier, just to appease him. It's good, of course it is, the sugar sharp and the custard rich and smooth, but he’s not tasting it. His mind’s elsewhere. Drenched in static. Will is still eating, still humming under his breath like he’s the only person in the world. Still so *close* .

James chews, slow and automatic, as if the motion might distract him from the warmth bleeding across the couch between them. It doesn’t. His eyes flick sideways, to Will’s mouth, to the tiny golden flake clinging to his lower lip. He swallows. Not the pastry- God, that went down ages ago. Something else. Something heavier. No more pastry box. No more neutral ground.

Only *this* .

Will shuffles. Not just a twitch this time- not just a casual, lazy lean. No, this is a full-body shift that lands him *right there* , right up against James. Their knees knock together, and James feels it like a live wire down his spine. His chest tightens. *Oh, fuck.*

He swallows the last bite of the pastry, though it may as well be gravel on his tongue, because every inch of his focus has telescoped in on the point of contact- skin through denim, heat through bone. Will’s thigh. Against him. *Unmistakably* .

Will, oblivious- or *acting* oblivious, the smug little bastard- just brushes flaky crumbs off his jeans with the kind of nonchalance that feels like psychological warfare. James can’t even move. Can’t *breathe* . He’s trained, surgically focused, on the smug flick of Will’s fingers and the casual shrug of his shoulders.

Will glances down absently.

His eyes catch on their knees, pressed tight, no daylight between them, and something flickers in his expression. Surprise. Curiosity. Realisation. Slowly, carefully, his gaze travels back up to meet James’. They're close. So close their breaths feel shared. One lean, one tilt of the head, and they’d be-

Will’s lips part like he’s about to say something profound, maybe even devastating.

Instead, he blinks and snorts, " *Guess your couch isn’t as big as it looks, huh?* "

James’ laugh is strangled in his throat, low and breathless- *not even close* , he thinks.

The couch isn't the problem. Will is.

James' laugh is a breath, not a sound. A scoff smothered in the shape of disbelief. His eyes stay locked on Will's- like he's trying to figure out whether this is real or some delicious hallucination brought on by weeks of silent obsession and bad sleep.

"Yeah," he murmurs, voice barely above the thrum of blood in his ears. "That must be it."

But they both know it isn't.

They both feel it.

The words hang between them like a dare, a flicked cigarette landing in dry brush. James watches the way Will's mouth twitches at the corners- like he knows exactly what kind of fire he's playing with. Like this little game is no longer a casual Tuesday night detour, but something slow and cracking and dangerous.

Will doesn't move away. He stays right there, knee pressed against James', shoulder inches away. The shared air between them feels humid now, thick with the scent of pastry sugar and something far heavier. Denial? Anticipation? Lust masquerading as politeness?

He could move, easily. There's space on the couch. There's plenty of room to breathe. But he doesn't. He stays locked in place like it's a test. Like it's a challenge. Like if James leans in, Will won't stop him. Won't flinch. Might even lean back.

Will raises a brow, almost like a challenge, and leans back slightly- arms draped across the couch like a prince. Like he belongs there. Like James is the one who should be grateful for his company.

James tilts his head, gaze slipping down to Will's mouth like it's a twitch he can't control. That same mouth is licking custard off the corner of his lip, completely unaware of the war that just erupted in James' chest.

"You know," James starts, voice low, careful, playing casual while his pulse hammers like a drum in his throat. "You're kind of dangerously good at this whole… seduction-through-snacking thing."

Will smirks, slow and self-satisfied. "I'll add it to my CV."

James raises a brow. "Top of the list, I hope."

Will doesn't answer. He shifts slightly, like he's trying to get more comfortable, but all it does is close the distance between them even further. Now their shoulders are brushing. Now James can feel Will's body heat pooling along his side like an unspoken confession.

His fingers skim the nape of James' neck and don't quite pull away. "So," he says lazily, "is this the part where you tell me I've overstayed my welcome, or…?"

James' mouth twitches. His eyes drag across Will's body, over his arms, his throat, the dip of his collarbone where his sweater droops just enough to make James ache.

“Oh, Lenney,” he says, voice purring at the edges, “if you were overstaying, you’d know. I’d make sure of it.”

James’ mouth is right there, and he’s looking at Will like he already knows what he tastes like. Like he’s weighing the idea of leaning in and biting, just a little. His eyes are half-lidded now, a slow drag of control and danger, and it’s killing him to hold back.

“Unless,” he murmurs, “you want me to kick you out. Is that it?”

Will’s face doesn’t move, but something in him shifts. His eyes flick down to James’ mouth for half a second. It’s enough. Enough to burn.

“You threatening me,” he says, low and playful, “or tempting me?”

James exhales slowly through his nose. “Would it make a difference?”

The silence swells.

And then Will moves. He dares to lean just the tiniest bit forward, like a match to gasoline, only to pluck the last of the crumbs from the coffee table. A cruel, calculated retreat. He licks the flakes from his finger, letting a moan escape- it’s casual, like he’s savouring the taste. But to James, it’s a sin. A fucking weapon.

Will swipes his thumb across the corner of his mouth, slowly licking it clean.

“You do know how to make things weird,” he says, voice all sugar and malice and spark.

James stares. And for the first time, it’s not quiet hunger, not polite yearning.

It’s vicious.

It’s the kind of hunger that knows it’s going to devour. It’s already choosing where to bite first. He smiles, wide and dark and dangerous, and it doesn’t reach his eyes.

Game on.

Chapter End Notes

James tries to reclaim the narrative through charm, but Will doesn't need to resist, in fact, he lets James twist himself into knots, maybe even trying to please a version of Will that may not even exist.

God, he's so desperate and deluded it's almost painful to write.

James is high on proximity, high on control, high on the idea of Will loving him back. I wanted Will to haunt James physically, not just digitally. And the illusion of closeness is the lie he keeps telling himself. Don't get me wrong, Will's into it, clearly.

But there's a beautiful anxiety under everything James does, and because Will plays along so casually, James feels like he's constantly chasing something that won't quite sit still. And that's what drives him deeper into obsession. James urgently tries to construct himself as something safe.

I hope you enjoyed!

Collateral

Chapter Summary

I: 'Black Out Days' - Phantogram
II: 'Blind' - Korn
III: 'if u think i'm pretty' - Artemas
IIII: 'No Surprises' - Radiohead

Chapter Notes

I'm enjoying the feedback from everyone and oh my- now that I've got the plot down to a tee, I'm enjoying the process.

So we set off last time with the lingering dread (if there ever is any other sensation in this fic) of Will sensually eating a pastry? If you ask me, he knows exactly what he's doing.

I digress.

This chapter is titled slightly different to the others- a singular word instead of a few. Very much intentional. Incredibly so. You'll see why. James has had it easy- he's in control. Too much control.

But despite everything, he's also weak. It probably wouldn't take much for him to... snap.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I

The water was just a little too warm, the kind that made James' skin pink at the wrists as he stood over the sink, lazily scrubbing at a bowl he'd already cleaned once. Maybe twice. The hum that escaped him wasn't tuneful, more a droning sound to fill the air between his own thoughts, something to lull Otto into staying where he was perched- curled like a loaf on the kitchen counter, tail wrapped neatly around his body, eyes half-lidded.

Sunlight angled through the window just right, throwing speckled patterns over the counter, over Otto, over James' fingers submerged in suds. The whole flat felt steeped in quiet- an intentional kind of silence, like it had been arranged. He rinsed the bowl, stacked it on the rack, and picked up a mug that didn't need washing. Again.

A vibration shivered against the countertop. James paused, fingers dripping. The phone was face down beside Otto, who blinked once and flicked an ear in irritation. James grabbed a tea towel, dried one hand with unnecessary care, then flipped the phone over. One message.

Distraction

'You around later? Come by mine?'

Just that. No emoji. No fanfare. Like it was casual. Like it wasn't going to realign James' entire axis of existence in a heartbeat. James stared at the screen. His mouth parted, but no sound came out- just the faint echo of water draining in the sink. Otto meowed quietly, as if scolding him for going still. James ran his tongue over his bottom lip, swallowed. Then, like he had to physically drag himself back into his body, he typed:

James

'Sure. Buzz me in.'

And as soon as it was sent, he tossed the towel over the back of the chair, wiped his hands dry, and reached to scratch Otto behind the ears. "Well," he said softly, eyes locked on the screen that hadn't lit up again yet, "isn't this interesting."

The phone buzzed again before James could even put it down, his heart doing that jittery little dance that said, *don't get too excited, idiot.* He flipped it open, eyes skimming the new message. It was Will, having sent his address. James snorted, a scoff dripping with everything that screamed, *Like I didn't already know that.* His lips curled into that faint, twisted smile that never quite reached his eyes.

He tossed the phone on the counter and slowly turned to the mirror perched above the hall table. Taking his time, like it was some kind of ritual, he studied himself. Black trousers- fitted just right, casual but sharp, the kind of thing that said, *I don't try too hard, but I kill anyway.* The white t-shirt was plain, boring even, but when paired with the soft black cardigan, it smoothed out the edges like a well-oiled machine. It was good. Perfectly *him.*

James ran a hand through his hair, then turned back to the counter, tapping his fingers lightly. *This is happening,* he thought, *and I'm ready.*

He backtracked and glanced down at Otto perched on the edge of the counter, tail flicking with lazy curiosity. His voice was softer than usual, low and careful like he was confessing a secret to a conspirator. "I'm going out for a bit, Otto. Don't get into trouble while I'm gone."

The cat blinked, unimpressed, then stretched and jumped down with the grace only cats own. James smiled, a little tight, a little strained. It wasn't like he was going for a walk around the block- no, this was crossing the threshold into *Will's* world, a move loaded with everything he'd been chewing on for days. He grabbed his jacket from the chair, fingers lingering on the fabric as if to draw strength from the texture, before slipping it on with slow, deliberate movements. The door handle felt cold under his palm, like a challenge daring him to turn it and step into the unknown.

The hallway light flickered above as he stepped out, the faint hum of the city swirling around him. He took a breath, the air sharp but electric, and started down the steps. Outside, the world stretched wide and ordinary- but James was seeing it through a lens tinted with anticipation. Each footfall on the pavement was a beat in his chest, a rhythm that pulsed faster the closer he got. Across the street, Will's building loomed, familiar yet suddenly thrilling in the way it stood just out of reach until now. James paused at the curb, the streetlight casting long shadows that danced at his feet, and the gentle rush of traffic was a backdrop to the storm brewing inside him.

He glanced back once, as if to check he hadn't forgotten anything- though he knew he hadn't. Then, with a steadying breath, he stepped off the curb and crossed. Each stride was measured, but inside, everything was chaotic, a mix of nerves and excitement twisting together in a dangerous tango. The world seemed to slow, the air thickening with unspoken possibilities, every second stretching out like the longest line of a script he'd been memorizing in secret. When he reached the door of Will's building, his hand hesitated on the buzzer, fingers trembling just enough to remind him he wasn't some cold, detached observer anymore.

This was real.

James pressed the buzzer, fingers lingering a second longer than needed, as if savoring the moment before the inevitable buzz echoed back- a cold, mechanical *click* that unlocked the heavy door with an obedient groan. The kind of sound that made your skin prick in anticipation.

He stepped inside, the door thudding closed behind him like a whispered warning, and the familiar scent of old carpet mixed with faint city grime wrapped around him like a second skin. His footsteps echoed softly in the narrow stairwell, each step a deliberate cadence, the

faint scrape of his shoes on the concrete bouncing off the walls like a secret rhythm only he could hear.

Reaching the landing, James paused, chest tightening in that weird delicious way obsession twists your guts. His eyes flicked to the corner where the little camera nestled in the corner of the ceiling- its black lens glossy and unblinking, a silent sentinel perched like a raven on his territory. He smiled, slow and a bit crooked, the kind of smile that hints at secrets and games only he knows the rules to.

That feeling- the rush of knowing- washed over him in a wave both intoxicating and terrifying. Here he was, a ghost in Will's world, but this time, he held the power. Every step Will took toward that door? Every breath, every glance? James could rewind it, replay it in his mind- or, hell, watch it again on the grainy feed flickering on his screen back home. He pictured the moment again: Will's hand reaching out, the soft creak of the door swinging open, that curious tilt of his head when he saw James standing there. The subtle shifts in expression- surprise, warmth, something almost unspoken. James could watch it on loop, dissect every microsecond like a mad scientist obsessing over a perfect experiment.

The camera was his secret weapon, a silent accomplice in his unfolding obsession. It wasn't just voyeurism anymore. It was *control.* Power. Intimacy distilled into pixels and wires. His hand brushed the cool metal railing as he exhaled slowly, shaking off the weight of that electric knowing, and pushed forward toward the door at the top of the stairs.

The next step wasn't just a movement up a flight of stairs. It was crossing a threshold- a shift from observer to participant. And James was ready.

James lifted his hand and knocked on the door- not too loud, like a secret code only they knew. One sharp rap, then another, his knuckles tapping out a quiet rhythm that echoed in the narrow hallway. The seconds stretched out, each heartbeat pounding loud in his ears.

Then, the door cracked open.

Will stood there, framed by the soft light of his apartment behind him, looking like he'd just stepped out of a warm shower. Damp hair tousled in that effortlessly messy way, a hint of moisture still clinging to his skin, and the faint scent of fresh soap wafted out, mixing with the cozy hum of the room. His clothes were relaxed- maybe an old hoodie slung over a loose T-shirt, the kind of outfit that promised comfort and no pretenses. Will's eyes flicked over James with that familiar casual curiosity, lips quirking into a small, knowing smile. That scent, that look- James felt his breath hitch, caught somewhere between wanting to step in and freeze in place. The door was open, the threshold crossed, and suddenly all the walls James had built around himself felt dangerously thin.

Will stepped aside with a casual flick of his hand, that easy kind of motion like he was parting curtains on a stage just for James, and the door swung wide open. "Come on in," he said, voice low and warm, like this was no big deal, just a Friday afternoon.

James stepped over the threshold, the slight creak of the floorboards underfoot filling the silence between them. The air hit him first- an odd mixture of old books, faint sweat, and the unmistakable tang of stale beer cans lurking somewhere out of sight. It was messy, sure, but it

wasn't careless. No, this chaos was curated, a subtle reflection of Will himself- unfiltered, unpolished, real.

He took a slow, deliberate breath and let his eyes drift over the apartment like a hunter surveying new terrain. There was a sofa, worn but inviting, cushions slightly askew, a scattering of clothes draped like forgotten trophies across the back. On the coffee table, an array of half-empty mugs, a few unopened mail envelopes, and a tangle of charging cables spilled over each other in mild rebellion. The walls were peppered with random art prints and photographs pinned in no apparent order, some curling at the edges as if resisting permanence. The floor was a patchwork of rugs and scuffed wooden boards, bare in places where feet had beaten down the years with previous owners. Potted plants struggled valiantly in the corners- some thriving, others limp and gasping for life, like survivors of a war with neglect.

James's gaze lingered on the small kitchen nook visible beyond, where a stack of dishes towered precariously by the sink, and a half-eaten sandwich sat abandoned on the counter like a forgotten afterthought. Everything was a little rough around the edges but unmistakably Will's. He caught a faint smile playing on Will's lips as the silence stretched. "Yeah, I know," Will said lightly, almost teasing, "It's a bit of a mess, but it's home."

Will waved a hand toward the sofa like it was the throne in this little kingdom he ruled. "Make yourself comfortable," he said, voice easy but with that subtle edge, like he was daring James to take a seat and claim some territory.

James swallowed, stepping forward, and as his eyes landed on the worn fabric of that sofa, something strange twisted in his chest. This wasn't the filtered, framed view from a window or a camera lens. This was real. Tangible. Like suddenly he was no longer some shadow outside looking in, but a part of the world Will inhabited. And that… Well, that was a whole different kind of dangerous. He perched on the edge of the sofa, careful not to seem too eager, though inside he was scrambling to keep cool. The scent of Will's cologne, clean with a hint of something musky, wrapped around him. It was oddly grounding.

Will shifted, grabbing a couple of bottles from the coffee table. "Beer?" he offered, holding one out with a grin that didn't quite reach his eyes.

James shook his head, a slow smirk tugging at his lips. "Nah, thanks. Don't really like the feeling of losing control," he said smoothly, though every fiber of him was on edge- trying not to show how much the invitation, the space, the closeness, all of it, was fucking with him.

Will laughed softly, shaking his head as he popped the cap off his own bottle. "Fair enough. I'll drink both for us then."

James shifted, settling back a bit, trying to look relaxed but inside counting every damn heartbeat. He glanced over at Will, who was already nursing his beer like it was a lifeline.

"So," James began, voice low, eyes locked on Will's. "This place... it's got character. Organized chaos, if that's even a thing."

Will chuckled, crossing his arms, leaning casually against the back of the sofa. “Yeah, well, it’s lived in. Unlike yours. I bet your plants get more water than your social life.”

James raised a brow, smirking. “Trauma, probably. Someone didn’t get enough hugs as a kid. Or maybe I’m just emotionally constipated.”

Will grinned, a flash of amusement lighting up his eyes. “Oh, definitely trauma. But hey, you seem functional enough. I’m the one drowning in dying plants and laundry piles big enough to hide in.”

James tilted his head, intrigued. “Functional? That’s generous. I’m more like a control freak with trust issues. But it’s charming, right?”

“Charming in a ‘I should call child services’ kind of way,” Will shot back, laughter soft but genuine.

James laughed too, feeling that rare flicker of ease- though it didn’t erase the underlying game. “At least I’m not pretending to have my shit together when my place looks like a tornado hit it.”

Will shrugged, taking a swig. “Hey, some of us embrace the chaos. Keeps life interesting. And gives the plants something to compete with.”

James’ eyes narrowed playfully. “Competition’s healthy. Especially when you know you’re winning.”

Will’s grin widened. “You’re cute when you think you’re in control.”

“Oh, I’m more than cute. I’m the puppeteer here. Just gotta make sure you don’t see the strings.”

Will leaned in just slightly, voice dropping. “Is that so? I’m counting on that to be a fun game.”

James swallowed, the air thick with something unsaid. “Trust me, you don’t want to lose.”

Will winked, relaxed but razor-sharp. “We’ll see.”

James loved, no- *worshipped* - the way Will always *thought* he was winning. It was like watching a cat chase a laser pointer, blissfully unaware that the real game was happening behind the scenes, where James pulled every string with quiet, smug precision. That flicker of confidence in Will’s eyes? It was the sweetest poison, the perfect bait to keep him hooked, tangled in the illusion of control while James held the reins tighter than ever. It wasn’t just power- it was a damn masterpiece of manipulation, and James planned to savor every second Will spent thinking he was one step ahead before the whole damn illusion came crashing down.

James let his gaze linger just a beat longer than polite, voice smooth but teasing as he dropped it like it wasn’t a big deal, “So… we gonna talk about that almost-kiss at my flat? If

you even wanna call it that." He arched an eyebrow, waiting for Will's reaction, eyes sharp like a hawk sizing up prey.

Will smirked, unbothered and sharp as a tack, "Almost-kiss? Please, James, you're overplaying your part. I'm pretty sure you were the one trembling."

James gave him that slow, deliberate look- the one that said *you really don't wanna test me* - and just like that, Will's smirk softened, a flicker of something like respect or surrender in his eyes. James felt the rush- he was still running this game, and Will? He was eating it up, whether he admitted it or not.

James settled back on the sofa, eyes never leaving Will. "Funny how you think you're running the show." His voice was easy, but his gaze was sharp, tracing Will like a secret code.

Will shrugged, a half-smile tugging at his lips. "Maybe I just like watching how you try." He leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees, and James shifted, just a little, closing the space between them without a word.

"That's cute," James said softly, voice dropping a notch. "You always think you're winning."

Will's eyes flicked up, catching James mid-inch closer. He didn't pull away. "Well, maybe I am." The grin was light, teasing, but the pause that followed held a weight neither dared say aloud.

James let his gaze wander slowly from Will's eyes down to his mouth, then back up. "So, about that... almost kiss," he said, voice almost casual but heavy with meaning.

Will's smirk deepened, a glint of mischief in his eyes. "Almost isn't quite, is it?"

James gave him a look- one sharp enough to cut glass. Will chuckled, backing off just a fraction, eyes dancing with something unreadable.

Will set his beer down with a soft clink, fingers lingering on the bottle as he leaned forward, folding into the conversation like a predator circling his prey. The air between them thickened, charged with all the things they *weren't* saying.

"We can never have a normal conversation, can we?" Will said, voice smooth but with a sharp edge. "You always have to be mysterious- like some cryptic riddle I'm supposed to solve. It's exhausting."

James felt the words like a slap, but he didn't flinch. Instead, he smiled like he was savoring the sting. "Mystery's just a way to keep you interested," he said, voice low, eyes locking onto Will's.

Will rolled his eyes but didn't look away. "Well, congratulations, you've definitely got my attention. But sometimes I wonder if it's all just a game to you."

James leaned in a fraction more, the space between them shrinking with every heartbeat. "Maybe it is," he whispered. "But it's a game only *I* know the rules to."

Will's smirk faltered for a heartbeat before he recovered, biting back another comeback. "Lucky me."

James tilted his head, watching Will with the kind of fascination normally reserved for rare animals caught in traps. "You've gotten sassy," he murmured, voice like the start of something dangerous. "Didn't peg you for a fighter, back when you were all sweet smiles and soft pleasantries at the café. Thought you'd be-" he paused, lips curling into something close to mockery, "easier."

Will raised his eyebrows, eyes flashing like that struck something deep. "That says more about your expectations than it does about me," he replied, tone laced with sugar and arsenic. "Sorry to disappoint you, but I don't do 'easy.' You want sweet and compliant? Try your plants."

James laughed under his breath, low and pleased, like the insult was a gift he hadn't known he wanted. "Oh, *Lenney* ," he drawled, letting the word roll off his tongue like smoke, "I don't want easy. If I did, I wouldn't be here."

Will leaned back, arms crossed, clearly not ready to drop it. "Well, good. Because I'm not here to be *handled* , either. Whatever game you think you're playing? I can match it."

James felt that thrill deep in his chest again- dangerous, pulsing, obsessive. It wasn't just the words. It was the way Will said them, the weight in his gaze, the challenge hidden in his posture. James had underestimated him. Once.

Not again.

He let the silence hang for a second too long, just to remind Will who set the rhythm. Then: "Noted."

Will looked at him for a long moment. His beer rested on his thigh, forgotten, condensation trailing down the glass like the conversation had suddenly turned humid. His expression shifted from smug to something quieter, gentler, and it made James want to recoil and lean in at the same time.

"Why do you always dodge it?" Will asked, softly but not tentatively. "Any time I bring up your past, you reroute the whole conversation like it never existed."

And if that wasn't a confusing shift, James didn't know what was. He'd felt it- the slow build of something deeper- more personal. Hidden beneath lightheartedness and jokes. Will wonders a lot of things that James can't quite read. He didn't like it.

James blinked slowly. "My past?"

"Your childhood," Will clarified. "Family. All that stuff you clearly don't talk about." A beat. "You deflect like it's a sport."

James smiled, but it was all teeth. "And you dig like it's your full-time job."

Will didn't back down. "You can psychoanalyse me over coffee and smirk about it like you know everything, but the second it's your turn- suddenly, we're out of sugar or you're joking about it like it's unheard of." He narrowed his eyes slightly. "You're a walking contradiction, James."

James' throat felt dry. He reached for his drink just to give himself something to do with his hands. He took a long sip. "Maybe I just think the past is boring," he said at last, flatly. "It's done. Over. Doesn't matter anymore."

Will tilted his head, unconvinced. "Or maybe it matters too much."

And oh- there it was. That *look* . That sharp, too-observant stare that made James feel like his chest was made of glass and Will had a rock in hand. James gave a low, humourless chuckle. "You're getting awfully philosophical for someone who played verbal tennis five minutes ago."

Will opened his mouth as if he was going to say something else. As if he was going to prod. No.

James stood abruptly, like something had snapped too tight in his chest. The air between them was suddenly too sharp, too pressurised, like the molecules had conspired against him and Will was just sitting there- legs spread, shoulders relaxed, beer bottle loosely in hand- acting like he hadn't just dug a scalpel straight into a place James kept bolted down with iron. Childhood. That word alone had weight. Not the saccharine kind that people laughed about in anecdotes over wine or texted their siblings about at 3am. No- James' childhood was more echo than memory, more blur than story. There weren't bedtime stories or scraped knees and warm hugs.

There were locked doors. Raised voices. Footsteps that taught him how to flinch before he could even spell the word. And now Will, with his stupid pastry moans and smartass smirks, had the audacity to ask *why* James didn't talk about it? Like the reason wasn't bleeding out of his silence already.

He paced toward the window, arms crossing then uncrossing, gaze flitting over to his apartment that he found comfort in, but it offered nothing now. He felt itchy in his skin. The walls of Will's flat felt like they were growing smaller by the second, too warm, too lived-in, too *him* . James didn't like this. The vulnerability. The fact that Will could press three words into a sentence and James was mentally clawing at escape routes. It made him feel twelve again, hiding behind drawn curtains, watching the neighbours argue over who forgot the recycling. So, yeah, maybe it was too much.

Maybe Will was too much. Too curious. Too persistent. Too *good* . James could feel himself slipping out of the present like a coat shrugged off at the door. He needed out. He needed to regroup, to reclaim the image Will had started to chip away at. James fucking Marriott wasn't supposed to spiral in someone else's living room. Not like this. Not when he was supposed to be the one pulling the strings.

Will stood almost immediately, the couch barely creaking beneath him before he was on his feet- hands out, as if James were a skittish animal he didn't want to spook further. The

bravado dropped clean off his face. No smirk. No lifted brow. Just concern, plain and clumsy and unhidden.

“Hey- James,” he said, softer now, voice stripped of all its usual sharpness. “I didn’t mean to… shit. I wasn’t trying to upset you.”

His hand twitched like he wanted to reach out but didn’t know if he should. And maybe that was the first smart thing he’d done all night- *not* touching him. His eyes flicked over James’ profile like he was scanning for damage, for confirmation that he hadn’t just shattered something he didn’t know was fragile. The room felt heavier now, like they’d both felt the tremor and were waiting to see if the walls would collapse.

“I was just- being a dick,” Will muttered, eyes down now. “I’m sorry. That was out of line.”

The quiet stretched long enough for it to register that he really *meant* it. No sarcasm. No double meaning. Just a boy standing awkwardly in his own flat, watching someone unravel and trying, desperately, not to be the reason for it.

James didn’t speak at first. He just stood there, stiff as a board, the shadows of Will’s flat slicing across his face like bars. His jaw clenched once, twice, until finally, he turned- eyes colder than they’d been all night.

“You don’t get to do that,” he said, voice flat. “You don’t get to dig for answers and then flinch when they bleed.”

Will blinked, startled. His lips parted slightly, but no words came.

And then- just like that- James exhaled. His shoulders fell a little. A tilt of the head. A dry, airy laugh passed his lips as he reached up to brush something invisible off his cardigan sleeve, like the moment had never happened.

“I mean, come on,” he said more lightly, smoothing the sharp edges of his tone. “I’m not that fragile. You poked. I bristled. We’ve both got our bad habits.”

Will blinked again, slower this time, his brows drawing together. The speed at which James reset his mask- it was almost supernatural. Like watching ice form over a lake in seconds. Whatever he'd glimpsed before, it was gone now, buried under charm and polish and distance. Replaced with the carefully curated version of James Marriott that didn’t shake, didn’t crack, didn’t let anyone see the wires.

James gave a small shrug, a crooked smile curling the corner of his mouth.

“It’s okay,” he added, as if those two words could undo the sting of the last few minutes. “You didn’t know.”

They talked for a little while longer- about nothing, really. The weather. A new café opening down the street. Otto’s latest crime spree against houseplants. James let his voice settle into something smooth and familiar, the kind that soothed, the kind that made people forget. Will smiled along, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. And when James finally stood to leave, Will

didn’t stop him. He just walked him to the door, quiet and a little too careful, like James was a bruise he wasn’t sure how to touch. The hallway was cold. The stairs creaked beneath James' steps. And as he crossed the threshold back into the night, the taste of unresolved tension thick on his tongue, he realised with a quiet fury that the guilt- Will's guilt- was still clinging to him like a second skin. Gnawing at his ribs. Nesting in the hollows of his bones.

II

The supermarket was unusually busy for a weekday evening. Screaming toddler, clashing trolleys, a pensioner in James' way for precisely ten minutes in front of the vegan yoghurts. Otto’s food was in his basket- plus a few things James didn’t need but couldn’t resist- and he was halfway through comparing pasta brands when his phone buzzed in his back pocket.

He reached for it lazily, thumb unlocking without thought, until he saw the notification.

‘Will Lenney posted to their story.’

James froze.

The packaging in his hand, something tricolore and aggressively overpriced, blurred out of focus as he opened Instagram with a practiced, fluid motion. The story loaded. There it was. A blurry, warm-toned selfie in what looked like a bar or pub. Will, mid-laugh, pint in hand, eyes half-closed in the kind of expression James had never caught in real time. Beside him, leaning in with ease and closeness, was a ginger man- freckles, muscles, stupidly endearing grin.

No tag.

James stared at the screen. The man's hand was resting comfortably near Will’s arm. Not touching, not quite- but it was the closeness that sent his blood into a low boil.

They looked comfortable. Too comfortable. The lack of a tag felt deliberate. Strategic.

James' stomach twisted, irrational and immediate. He shoved the pasta back onto the shelf with more force than necessary and pulled his phone down again. He locked the screen. Unlocked it. Opened the story again. Zoomed in. The redhead’s smile was wide, teeth the perfect shade. Something about him looked too charming. The kind of charm that slid into your life unnoticed. The kind of charm Will probably liked. James stared for a beat longer, then tapped open their regular messages.

James:

‘[eyes emoji]’

‘Who’s your friend?’

He left it like that. Casual. Chill. Not chill at all. He tossed the phone into his basket like it offended him and continued through the store with no recollection of what he picked up next. He was halfway to self-checkout when the screen lit up again.

Distraction:

‘That’s Mikey. Why?’

Mikey.

James practically hissed the name under his breath as he scanned his items. It sounded like the kind of name you got tattooed on your ass in Ibiza after three shots of Jäger. He bagged his shopping with clenched jaws and a forced breath through his nose.

James:
‘You two looked close’

He didn’t add punctuation. That was important.

Will didn’t reply immediately. James walked slowly home, earbuds in but no music playing, the silence pressing against his ears like insulation. A reply came just as he reached his front door.

Distraction:

‘We’ve been friends forever. He’s like family.’

‘Jealous?’

James snorted aloud.

James:

‘Curious. You’re allowed to have friends. Even ones with alarmingly symmetrical faces.’

There was a pause. James fed Otto mechanically, his phone never leaving his other hand.

Distraction:

‘Didn’t know you were paying such close attention to symmetry.’

James:
‘I’m attentive by nature.’

That was the truth, wasn’t it?

He settled onto the sofa, legs curled beneath him, Otto leaping up and sprawling like he owned the place. James stared at the screen again. The story was still up. He watched it for the fifth time.

James:
‘Do you see your other friends much?’

A beat. Another.

Distraction:
‘Not really. Mikey’s kind of it. You?’

James hovered. Then typed:

James:
'I'm not the best at people. I have Otto. That counts.'

A longer pause.

Distraction:
'The cat's your emotional support friend?'

James:
'He's judgemental and needy. So yes.'

Will reacted to that with a laughing emoji. James watched it blink on his screen and felt… weird. Hollow, almost. Because the truth was, he didn't have anyone. No Mikey. No Will. Not really. Not yet.

Distraction:
'You seem like someone who used to have a lot of friends.'

James stared at the message. The ghost of something flickered through him.

James:
'They stopped being fun.'

There was no reply to that. None was needed.

He turned his phone face-down again, leaned back into the cushions, and stared at the ceiling. The silence rang louder than it had before. And Mikey's smile lingered behind his eyes like a shadow.

III

The bar was warm with people and noise- humid, muggy, all elbow-room and artificial laughter. The kind of place you had to squeeze into. Glasses clinking. A sticky floor that had seen too many spilled lagers and too many strangers trying to forget themselves. The lights were low, tinted with that amber haze bars think makes them romantic but really just makes everyone look tired.

James stood by the edge of it, his fingers curled loosely around a sweating glass of something fizzy- non-alcoholic, naturally. He leaned against a post near the back, the kind that propped up buildings and bodies alike. The last time he'd seen this place was in a blurry Instagram story. Two faces. One laugh. One friend not tagged.

He hadn't planned this. Not exactly. But he'd known the name of the bar the second he saw the photo. Of course he had.

And now he waited. Casual. Cold. A presence, not a participant.

Will arrived twenty minutes in- buzzed and flushed from the alcohol and the heat. His hair was slightly messier than usual, and he wore that carelessness that only came after two pints and good company. His eyes scanned the crowd absently, then landed on James like it was the last thing he'd expected to see.

And then- Will lit up.

A smile broke across his face, sharp and genuine. A beat later, he nudged someone beside him, the ginger blur from the story- *Mikey* , of course, and gestured. James raised his glass in acknowledgment. Cool. Controlled. Will practically dragged Mikey across the floor toward him, eyes bright. "James!" he called, a little too loud over the music. "What are you doing here?"

James tilted his head. "Could ask you the same."

Will laughed, and for a moment, just a moment, it was easy to pretend everything was light. No cameras. No tension. Just an ordinary Friday night.

"I thought you hated places like this," Will said, grinning as he stopped in front of him, a little out of breath from the excitement. "Or do you just hate *people* like this?"

James' gaze slid sideways to Mikey, who stood quietly, observing with a polite, unreadable look. "I make exceptions," James replied smoothly, his eyes locking with Will's.

Mikey stuck out a hand. "Hi. I'm Mikey."

James took it, shook it, studied him. "I know."

Will laughed again- nervous, this time. "James, this is Mikey. Mikey, this is the guy I told you about."

Mikey raised an eyebrow. “The... one with the iced coffees?”

James smirked. “Among other things.”

Mikey smiled back, but James saw the flicker in his eye- something calculating. Maybe James wasn’t the only one doing recon tonight. They stood there for a moment, all three of them. Too close, too aware. The air between them tight as a wire, stretched just enough to hum if you listened right. James sipped his drink. “Well,” Will said, attempting brightness, “guess the gang’s all here.”

James' eyes flicked to him. “Is that what we are?”

Will smiled. “I mean, you’re here now, aren’t you?”

James didn’t answer. He looked around the bar instead. Memorised the exits. Noted the angles. Took in Mikey’s casual lean, the way his hand grazed Will’s arm once when reaching for his drink. He’d expected to feel more. Rage. Jealousy. Something hot. Instead, he felt a cold, simmering curiosity. He wanted to know everything about Mikey. His patterns. His tells. His intentions. Not because Mikey was dangerous, but because Mikey was close. And James had learned that closeness was the most dangerous thing of all.

They migrated toward the back, one of those red faux-leather booths tucked beneath a cracked wall sconce, flickering as if unsure whether it wanted to illuminate this particular conversation. The din of the bar softened back here, drowned by a poor playlist and the muffled beat of other people’s lives. Quieter. More intimate. Easier to watch people think.

Will slid in first, naturally, taking the inner seat with Mikey following beside him. James took the opposite side alone, mirroring them. A strategic choice, of course, so he could see everything. For a moment, it was just the sound of glasses being set down.

Will reached for his pint, took a sip, then leaned back against the wall. “I haven’t been here in years before last week,” he said, trying to be casual. “They’ve still got the same terrible lighting.”

Mikey laughed, light and quick. “It’s part of the charm, I think. Makes you feel like you’re in a terrible coming-of-age movie.”

“I thought that was just being around you,” Will shot back, grinning.

James tilted his head, eyes narrowing. “You two are quite the double act.”

Will’s smile flickered but didn’t disappear. “We’ve known each other a long time.”

Mikey nodded. “Since uni. I used to copy his lecture notes, and he used to steal my cigarettes. A classic tale of mutual exploitation.”

James hummed, swirling his drink. “Sounds precious.”

Will rolled his eyes, and Mikey let out a soft chuckle- at ease, relaxed in a way James both admired and loathed. It was the kind of warmth that came from genuine connection.

Familiarity. Something earned.

“So, James,” Mikey said after a beat, folding his arms on the table, “what do you do? Besides making iced coffee and being mysterious as shit?”

James raised an eyebrow. “Surprised Will didn’t give you my full CV.”

Mikey smirked. “He gave me *snippets* . You’re... in media?”

“Something like that,” James replied, vague on purpose. His voice was smooth but distant, eyes flicking between them. “And you? Let me guess- graphic designer.”

Mikey snorted. “A bit of that. I work with editing. Lots of cuts. Lots of pretending the same videos are exciting.”

Will leaned his head against the wall, smiling into his drink. “He gives great results though. Gets all dramatic with the art of photoshop.”

“It’s a performance,” Mikey said with mock-seriousness. “Like all the best lies.”

James watched them both. Their ease. Their comfort. It was like watching someone sit in a seat you always thought was yours. But even so, James didn’t flinch. Didn’t break. He leaned forward slightly, resting his forearms on the table.

“You two seem close.”

Will blinked. “We are.”

James smiled, slow and thin. “That’s nice.”

Mikey watched him carefully then, like someone suddenly aware they were being studied. And James? James sat back, as calm as ice in a glass. He wasn’t here to compete. He was here to observe. And *Will* - Will was sitting a little too close to Mikey for James’ liking, but also turning toward him, eyes flicking to James’ drink, to the sharp line of his jaw, to the space between them.

Will, sensing something sour starting to congeal in the air, something just beneath the casual conversation, cleared his throat and leaned forward, elbows on the table, palms flat like he was grounding himself. His smile was faintly too bright now, teeth showing, eyes flicking between the two men like a host trying to salvage a party.

“So,” he said, aiming it more at James, “do you always make people feel like they’re being interviewed?”

James tilted his head, lips curving just slightly. “Only when they make me feel like it.”

Mikey let out a dry laugh. “And I assume *we* qualify?”

“You qualify,” James said smoothly. “Will... intrigues.”

Will blinked. There was something unspoken in the space between their gazes. A private language. Something felt but not yet named. His fingers tapped against the side of his glass.

“Still running your little psychological experiments, are you?” Will asked, a teasing lilt to his tone, but James could feel the jab underneath.

James leaned in, just a fraction. “Only when the subject is worth dissecting.”

Will didn’t look away. But he bit the inside of his cheek, and James *saw* it- the flicker of nerves, the subtle shift of his posture, as if trying not to give anything away. *Trying* , but failing. James watched it all like a theatre critic.

Mikey, oblivious or pretending to be, raised his eyebrows. “Alright, I’ll bite- what am *I* , then? If Will’s your little science project, what role do I play?”

James didn’t blink. “Collateral.”

The table went quiet.

Just for a moment.

Will laughed. Too loudly. “Jesus, James.”

“I’m kidding,” James said, that signature smirk returning like a well-worn coat. “Mostly.”

Will sat back again, still chuckling, but there was a new tightness around his eyes. James watched him. Watched the way Will’s hand moved toward his drink. The way he glanced down and then back up, a breath caught between teeth. James could practically *feel* the thoughts behind his face; Will was trying to decide if James was flirting or threatening him.

He was *owning* him.

“Anyway,” Will said, pushing forward, trying to resettle the dynamic. “You haven’t told us your tragic origin story of how you ended up in here. What made the enigma tick?”

“Oh,” James said lazily, “I don’t tell stories. I *watch* them.”

Will raised his glass again but didn’t drink. He was trying to hold the reins, bless him. James smiled as he crossed one leg over the other beneath the table. A shift of weight, an intentional lean forward, elbow propped as he rested his chin against his fingers.

“I know what you’re doing,” Will said, but it was quieter now. Not a challenge, an observation.

“Do you?” James asked, voice silk. “Then tell me.”

Will opened his mouth, hesitated, then exhaled a soft laugh. “You want me to say it out loud so you can twist it into something else.”

James grinned. Mikey blinked between them, mouth twitching. “Wow. You two should just make out and get it over with.”

Will snorted. James didn’t laugh. He simply leaned closer across the table and said, softly, “You think you’d win, Will?”

Will froze. Just for a second. Then he rolled his eyes, but it didn’t land the way it should have. His posture betrayed him, shoulders curling slightly, defensively. Like someone folding inward before they even realise they’ve been cornered.

And James *saw* it. *Felt* it. He’d placed Will into his lap metaphorically, piece by piece. All the sparring, the flirtation, the posturing; James had been playing with puzzle pieces only he could see the image of. And it was almost done. Almost.

Will sipped his drink, trying to mask the pause. “You’re exhausting, you know that?”

James smiled. “I’ve heard worse,” he said.

Will's laugh was quiet this time, but genuine. Tired. And James loved it. Loved watching the walls crack. Loved knowing Will was fighting to stay upright while James sat completely still.

Mikey swirled the last bit of beer in his glass, cocked his head, and grinned like the devil. “I mean... not to be *that* guy,” he said, eyes flicking between the two of them, “but do you two wanna be alone? Because if I have to sit through one more metaphorical undressing, I might start charging rent.”

Will laughed. Fully, this time. And James hated how warm it sounded. He hated it even more when Will leaned slightly toward him and said, “Careful, Mikey. Keep talking like that and James might think *you’re* jealous.”

Mikey snorted. “I’m not the one playing footsie under the table.”

What.

His leg- his fucking *leg* - was brushing Will’s. Not just once. Not an accident. A slow, unconscious rhythm. He hadn't even noticed. Heat surged up the back of his neck like a threat. He coughed, an awkward, sudden splutter, and yanked his leg back under the table like he’d touched a hot stove.

Will turned to him, wide-eyed and biting a grin. “Oh?” he said, voice sweetly taunting. “That *was* you?”

James opened his mouth, closed it. Something acidic curled in his stomach.

“No,” he said flatly. “Must’ve been the ghost of desperate tension haunting this booth.”

Will snorted. Mikey nearly choked on his drink.

But James wasn’t laughing.

His pulse thudded in his jaw, and he stared straight ahead, blinking slowly. Jesus Christ. Had he really not noticed? Was he *that* gone? His body acting on instinct, drawn toward Will like static to silk? Was it obvious? Had they both known?

He wasn't even angry, he was *unsettled* . Like he'd just caught himself sleepwalking into traffic. Will tilted his head, watching him with a grin that teetered between playful and dangerous.

James forced his shoulders back, slid on the smirk like a weapon. "It's sweet," he murmured, voice cool again, collected. "The way you pretend not to notice the tension while actively feeding it."

Will blinked. Briefly thrown. But then he leaned in, grinning. "Well. Gotta keep things interesting, don't I?"

"Oh, you're *interesting* , alright," James replied. "Like a car crash I can't look away from."

Mikey whistled, leaning back. "God *damn* . This is the weirdest foreplay I've ever witnessed."

The laughter buzzed between them like static, light and harmless on the surface, Mikey chuckling, Will tossing back the last of his beer, the three of them sitting in this dimly-lit booth like old friends. Except they weren't. Not even close.

James leaned back, arms draped loosely over the top of the bench, legs crossed at the ankle in what looked like ease. On the outside, he was performing charm. Casual, comfortable. But inside, he was watching. Clocking every twitch of Will's fingers on his glass. The precise inflection of Mikey's voice when he said James' name.

And then Mikey said it.

A throwaway comment, tossed with the carelessness of someone who *didn't realise he'd just drawn blood* .

"I mean, if I were Will, I'd have blocked you ages ago. You've got that real 'hot guy who definitely tracks your location' vibe."

James froze. Just slightly. Just enough that *he* noticed it.

Will laughed. Loud and easy. "You're not wrong," he said, nudging Mikey with his shoulder. "He *does* have a serial killer face."

"Thank you," James said, cool and amused on the surface. "I try to keep it consistent."

But inside? Inside, everything shifted. That wasn't a joke. Not really. That was a *needle* . A test. James turned his gaze to Mikey, eyes narrowing just slightly, like fog clearing on a windowpane, revealing something much colder behind it.

Mikey smiled at him. Friendly. But there was something in it. A sharpness. A hint of something... knowing. James tilted his head, just a fraction.

And *oh* .

It dawned on him like a bitter taste at the back of the throat.

Mikey wasn't just the funny friend. He wasn't just some affable ginger with punchlines and beers and dimples that made Will smile. No. Mikey was *watching* him. Measuring. Noticing the things that Will let slide. Laughing at the right time, sure, but he never fully *relaxed* . His eyes were always moving. Flicking between James and Will like he was tracking patterns.

Mikey was a *problem* .

James let out a low breath, like a man reacquainting himself with an old threat. His smile held, but his eyes chilled over. Will didn't notice. He was still grinning, drunk enough to be soft around the edges. Still buzzed from the beer and the attention. But James was stone-cold sober.

He'd assumed Mikey was disposable. A background character. Static.

But now he was watching James too closely. Laughing too specifically. Making jokes that *cut* .

He *saw* too much.

James' fingers tapped the rim of his glass with a slow, methodical rhythm. He kept his posture loose, his voice easy. He even chuckled at Mikey's next joke. But the decision had already been made.

Mikey was a variable.

And James didn't like variables.

Especially not the ones Will trusted with everything. Not the ones Will *smiled at like that* . Not the ones who sat across from him in dim booths and said things that *weren't really jokes at all* .

James shifted forward just slightly, just enough to close the distance between performance and presence. His glass twirled slowly between his fingers, eyes half-lidded, the smile playing at the corner of his mouth too sharp to be kind.

"So, Mikey..." he began, casual, but *not* . "You always this protective, or is it just when I'm around?"

Will chuckled at that, almost reflexively, but Mikey stilled. Just a *second* too long before he smiled back, raising his brows like it was all one big joke. "Depends. You always this intense, or is it just when you're around Will?"

Touché.

James' smile didn't waver, but inside, his thoughts snapped taut. That wasn't banter. That was a *fencing match* . He leaned in a little more, elbows on the table now. Lowering his voice,

like the conversation had become intimate. Exclusive.

"I just think it's endearing," James said slowly, "that you pretend to be lighthearted, when really you're cataloguing everything I say."

Mikey laughed. "Man, you give me too much credit."

"No." James said, tapping his finger once against the glass. "No, I don't think I do."

Silence stretched a breath too long. Mikey took a sip of his drink, eyes not leaving James'. Something *tight* flickered in his expression, barely there, but enough. And that was all James needed. *Oh* , he thought, sitting back, the smirk returning to his lips like a crown.

Confirmed.

Mikey was clocking him. And James had just watched him flinch.

James tilted his head toward Will, voice smooth, syrupy. "You know," he murmured, "I still think about that pastry occurrence on my sofa."

Will blinked once, caught slightly off-guard, but not disarmed. A slow grin crept across his face. "Do you?"

James let the moment breathe. Let the tension build like a violin string pulled taut. Then, almost innocently, he added, "Yeah. You were gonna kiss me. I think you would've."

Will opened his mouth, then closed it again, caught between amusement and something warmer. "Maybe," he said lightly, almost as a challenge. "You'll never know."

But James wasn't looking at Will anymore. No, his eyes were locked on Mikey. The flicker. There it was. Thank God Will was drunk. Easy. Far too *allowing* . This was exactly what James needed to test the threads between Mikey and himself. Mikey forced a laugh. "God, you two are insufferable," he said, tone flippant but eyes tight.

James gave him a slow, lazy smile. "We try."

Under the table, James' leg stretched just a little, brushing Will's.

Will leaned in with a crooked smile, his tongue just barely poking against the inside of his cheek. "Maybe next time I won't let *you* get away with teasing," he shot back, that lopsided grin flirting dangerously close to earnest. "You're cocky when you're not in control. I kind of like it."

Will didn't know it, not really. But in his half-drunken haze, lit from the inside out with whatever cheap beer was in his bloodstream and whatever boyish bravado was clouding his thoughts, he was making himself open. *Malleable* . Soft enough to push, but not so far he'd remember which pressure points had been touched.

No. James would *never* do anything to Will while he was like this.

But oh, this was exactly the state he *needed* him in.

Drunk enough to relax, pliant enough to flirt, unaware enough to miss the parts that mattered. The pieces Mikey couldn't hide. James let his eyes flick to Mikey; quick, surgical. And Mikey was watching. Tension carved into the line of his jaw. Sip. Watch. Fiddle with his sleeve. He was *seeing* it. And he *hated* it.

Good.

James' knee brushed Will's again beneath the table. And Will didn't move away. Instead, he sighed, lazy and content, and leaned his chin into his hand like he was basking in the glow of someone he *trusted* . James felt it like a crown being lowered onto his head.

Control wasn't a grip. It was a thread. And he had all of it. Wrapped around both their necks.

Mikey leaned in with the slow, syrupy laziness of someone pretending to stretch, his pint halfway raised to his lips, just enough movement to appear casual. But his mouth tilted close to James' ear, and the warmth of his breath betrayed the knife under the velvet.

"Funny, ain't it?" Mikey whispered, so low it barely registered over the hum of the bar. "How some people think they can just... waltz into someone's life and act like they *belong* there."

James didn't react. Not immediately. He felt the words slide through his skin like pins being neatly, elegantly inserted beneath the fingernails.

Will was looking down into his glass, eyes glassy and unfocused, lips parted slightly like he was half-listening to the music or the memory of some joke from earlier. He didn't hear it.

Good.

James tilted his head slowly, gaze still fixed on Will's profile like he was admiring something priceless. But his words dropped like oil. "Well," James murmured under his breath, the corner of his mouth barely moving. "You'd know all about being a guest overstaying their welcome."

Mikey's smile didn't falter. But something shifted in his eyes. The kind of thing you only noticed if you were looking for it. James always was.

They pulled apart with perfect timing, like nothing had happened, like the air hadn't dropped a degree around them. Will looked up blearily between them, blinking once like he'd missed a beat in a song.

"You two done making eyes at each other?" Will teased, reaching for the rest of his drink with the kind of slowness that made James ache with the desire to *record it* . "You've been weirdly quiet."

James smiled, lazy and loose. "Just making friends."

But the word tasted sour.

Because Mikey wasn't going to back down. That much was clear now. That threat hadn't been clumsy. It hadn't been a warning. It had been a *move* , the kind James himself would've made. Mikey saw him for what he was, or was beginning to.

And he had Will's history. His trust. Maybe even his loyalty.

That wasn't a card James could let stay in play.

Not for long.

He watched Mikey laugh at something Will said, the way his hand landed easily on Will's shoulder, as if it had always known where to go.

No.

James didn't know *how* yet. But Mikey had to go.

The drinks in their hands sweated beneath the weight of silence- just one careless nudge, one flicker of intent, and the whole glass would shatter, scattering their fragile balance across the table like a slow-motion collision no one could stop.

IIII

James is perched on his windowsill, the screen in front of him dimmed, Otto purring asleep behind him. But his focus isn't on Will's empty window. He's somewhere else. Somewhere colder. Somewhere darker. Somewhere with linoleum floors and stale cigarette smoke curling under a doorframe.

He was eight. It was his birthday. But he knew better than to expect anything. The house was quieter than usual, which meant it was worse than usual. His parents weren't speaking. The quiet was razor-sharp. He remembers thinking it was like living *inside* the moment just before a plate shatters.

He had asked for a red bicycle. Not because he thought he'd get it. But because that was what normal kids asked for. He remembers how hopeful he was when he said it, too- like a fool. Like an idiot.

That morning, he'd crept downstairs in mismatched socks. His lip still split from biting it in his sleep, a habit he hadn't grown out of. He remembers thinking, *maybe* . Just *maybe* . But the only thing in the living room was his dad passed out on the couch with the TV still playing static, and his mum slamming the cupboard door so loud it made him flinch.

No bike. No card. No mention.

Just his mum's voice, sharp and venom-wrapped:

"Stop walking around with that look on your face. You think people owe you things just for being alive?"

Later that day, he'd sat at the window in his room, numb, as he watched the neighbours' kid ride in circles on a shiny new red Raleigh that they'd gotten for their own birthday the month before. James had never hated a shade of red more. That kid had a plastic bell and tassels on the handlebars, and the sun made everything look golden and good and far away.

That's when his sister had sat beside him. She didn't promise anything big, because she knew better than to lie. But she'd taken a red ribbon from her hair, tied it gently around his wrist, and whispered:

"You might not have the bike. But you've got the colour. Next year, you'll have your own."

He wore that ribbon for months, even after it faded to a muddy rust. Even after the knot frayed. It made the bruises easier to look at, like he could pretend they were just a part of the red.

And when his father *did* get him a bike eventually- cheap, second-hand, the handlebars sticky with old chewing gum- James didn't ride it. He left it in the shed to rust. Let the spiders have it. It wasn't *the* red bike. It didn't come from love. It came from guilt.

Back on the windowsill in his apartment, James rubs the inside of his wrist absently. The skin is bare. No ribbon. No promise. But when he looks across at Will's window- dim, still- something in him still reaches.

Still aches.

Because the red bicycle was never about the bike. It was about being seen.

And maybe, just maybe, Will *could* be the first person to *really* see him.

Even if James has to break every rule- every person- to make it happen.

Chapter End Notes

Well, well, well.

I originally debated naming this chapter 'The Red Bicycle' but ended up changing that. It felt too obvious, too real. James' childhood experiences evidently play a big part in who he is today, and I often feel like we need more insights into why he does what he does. What hurt him, what made him tick.

This chapter is very much where James' little fantasy world gets punched in the face. And by fantasy world, I mean his delusional belief that Will exists solely for him. This is the jealousy chapter where James has his first exposure to true threat, with someone who has real access to Will.

Mikey enters this story like a glitch in James' perfectly coded simulation. He disrupts James' neat little system and now there's laughter James can't feel, touches he hates tracking and memories he doesn't own with the man he's ever so devoted too. As soon as James sees Mikey he assigns meaning, danger and competition.

It hammers in the motif which I've been building: that Will is a possession, not a person. Mikey is taking something from James, and gives a sense of earned intimacy despite James being so morally corrupt it's actually jarring.

But we sympathise with him, don't we?

The next chapter is going to be (hopefully) brilliant. I look forward to reading some comments if you have the time to leave them. Thank you :)

Under The Same Light

Chapter Summary

I: 'Mama's Boy' - Dominic Fike
II: 'Love Me Not' - Ravyn Lenae
III: '(You're The) Devil in Disguise' - Elvis Presley
IIII: 'Fool' - Djo

Chapter Notes

So I quite possibly got the most comments ever on my previous chapter? Didn't know it would hit that hard! I am so happy (and somewhat remorseful?) that so many people find the relationship between James and his sister in this story relatable, in both good and bad ways. It always helps to add a bit of depth to my own writing knowing that it is having such a big impact on my readers.

Lets not drag this note out- lets get straight into it.

(Thanks for reading and commenting)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I

James was still. Not just quiet- not just afraid. *Still.*

He stood at the edge of the kitchen, fingers pressed flat against the counter like he could absorb its coolness through his skin, white-knuckled and rigid. His shoulders drawn up, barely breathing. A statue built for survival.

The shouting behind him was muffled, blurred, like someone had turned the world down just a notch too low to make out the words. It didn't matter. He knew them already. The rhythm of it. The venom. The cadence. His father's voice rose and fell like an old, familiar siren- part warning, part punishment.

Then the crash.

The sound of a plate hitting the wall, exploding into porcelain shrapnel.

James didn't flinch. Not anymore.

His eyes stayed locked on the chipped tile in front of him. Pale blue and off-white. One had a crack through it- he used to trace it with his toe when he was younger, like it could be a map to somewhere else. Anywhere else.

Behind him, the shouting continued. Another crash, a glass this time. The sharp, high-pitched sound of it fracturing felt closer, more personal. His mother said nothing. She never did. She was somewhere at the table, he thought. Maybe sitting with her hands in her lap, maybe watching the window like she could leap through it and never come back. Maybe trying not to exist at all.

James didn't turn to look. He never turned.

He had learned the rules a long time ago. Don't speak. Don't move. Don't cry. Stillness made him invisible. Stillness was armour. He breathed through his nose. In. Out. In. Out.

Measured.

Controlled.

Like he could make the world smaller, like he could make himself disappear. He stared at the smear of something red on the countertop. Jam? Blood? It didn't matter. Everything blurred here. Everything bled into everything else. His jaw was clenched so tight it ached, but he kept it that way. The pain was grounding. It reminded him where his body was.

Behind him, the tone changed. Louder. More directed.

His name. His father's voice like gravel and spit.

A footstep. Then another. A belt unlooping. The sound alone made James' stomach seize. But still- still, he didn't move. He didn't cry. He didn't ask for anything. He just pressed his fingers harder into the counter and watched a single bead of condensation from the sink trickle down toward the drain. A shadow fell over the counter.

James didn't lift his head. He didn't have to. He could feel the weight of his father's presence like a heatwave crawling down his back.

Then the voice, rough, deliberate, and coated in contempt. "What the fuck *is this* supposed to be?"

James blinked slowly. Once.

He heard the shuffling of pages, the familiar scratch of cheap notebook paper being torn, flipped through, inspected without understanding. Then the unmistakable sound of it hitting the linoleum floor, hard, like the weight of what it held was offensive.

"You sittin' around drawin' *people* like some little pervert? Is that what this is now?"

James didn't move. He *wanted* to look- to check, to see if the spine had cracked- but he stayed exactly where he was. His fingers twitched against the counter.

"You think this is normal? Watching folks and scribbling 'em down like they're zoo animals? That's not *art* , boy. That's not a hobby."

A long pause. The air buzzed with silence.

"Jesus Christ, you're a *freak* ."

James felt something splinter. Not outside, inside. A hairline fracture he couldn't track, couldn't contain. He could hear the pages being kicked. The notebook sliding across the floor, landing with a quiet thud somewhere behind him.

"I swear to God, sometimes I think you're not right in the *head* . I got stuck with a problem child. All the other dads get sons that play football or fix bikes. I get the one that stares out windows all day and *draws people* like he's planning to skin 'em."

James blinked again. He wanted to scream. He wanted to laugh. He wanted to throw the jam jar at the wall and watch it shatter like the plate. Instead, he turned his head. Slowly. The notebook sat on the floor, splayed open like a wound. The pages he'd filled with sketches- fast, obsessive things- lined figures caught in motion, glances captured mid-turn, a boy in the park, a neighbour on the porch. Nothing harmful. Just... people.

Observed. Understood.

And now it was torn, ruined, violated by dirty fingers and spit-flecked judgement. James stared at it, unmoving.

"Look at me," his father snapped.

But James didn’t. He looked at the notebook. And something inside him *tilted* . This man- this *thing* - couldn’t comprehend it. Couldn’t *see* . James had watched his father, too. Watched how he slammed cupboard doors harder when he was hiding guilt. How his mouth curled when he lied. James had always been watching. Always understanding.

And one day... *one day* he'd do more than watch. But for now, he stayed still. Still as prey. Still as poison steeping in silence. And the silence burned like hell.

A sudden movement. Too fast.

The hand came down on his shoulder like a vice- *too hard* , knuckles pressing bone, not grip but *claim* . James jolted, not from pain, but from the *violence* of it. His father wrenched him backwards from the counter with that same brute force that had once pulled branches off trees in their garden.

“ *I said, look at me.* ”

James stumbled, the heel of his sock catching on the linoleum as he was turned- *forced* - to face him.

Face him.

Up close, his father’s breath smelled like cigarettes and meat left out too long. His eyes were small, shrunken by rage and disappointment, pupils rimmed red. His mouth twitched, some half-snarl he probably thought made him look dominant, but all James could see was the desperation underneath. The pathetic ache of a man who hated himself more than he could ever hate his son.

Still, James said nothing.

“You think you’re better than me? Huh? Think you’re *clever* with your little freak-drawings and your quiet little act? You ain’t *mysterious* , you’re just a damn *weirdo* .”

Then another voice, softer, but only in volume. His mother. “Why can’t you just be *normal* , James?”

She wasn’t even looking at him when she said it. She was flicking the tea towel over her wrist, as if that would erase the tension, the shattered plate, the breathless silence between words. Her tone was off- it was bored, exhausted. But underneath, underneath… There it was. That shrill edge of *fear* . Not of James. Of *him* . Of the man whose hand still clutched James' shoulder like it was something detachable. Replaceable.

James met her eyes for a moment. And something broke. “What, like *you* ?” he said, voice smooth. *Too* smooth.

The silence sucked the oxygen from the room.

His father blinked, like he'd just been slapped without contact. James could feel the grip on his shoulder tighten, white hot. But he didn’t flinch. Not this time.

“You think *I’m* the problem,” James went on, voice colder now. “You both act like I came out this way. Like I just *sprouted wrong.* But maybe I’m just the only one here who’s honest.”

A crack of tension. His father raised his free hand like he might-

But James didn’t stop speaking.

“Maybe I draw people because I *understand* them. Maybe I watch because no one ever *sees* me. Maybe I’m weird because someone had to be- someone had to see this house for what it *really* is.”

His father shoved him. Not a slap. Not a punch. A *shove* - clumsy, desperate, a man who had just lost something and couldn’t name what. James stumbled, nearly hit the counter again. But he was still smiling.

There it was.

The shift.

That was the first time he felt it- that high. That glimmering thread of control in chaos. Something awful and slick and *godlike* coiling in his chest.

He had hurt them. Not with fists, but with *truth* .

And one day, when he was stronger- when he was older- he wouldn’t need to speak at all.

He’d just *watch* . And they’d crumble anyway.

Wait- he jerked awake with a gasp that sounded like it had been torn out of someone else’s throat.

His sheets were damp, tangled around his legs like restraints, and his t-shirt clung to him, soaked through. The room was dark, stifling. Silent, except for the soft, steady purr of Otto curled beside him, oblivious. James sat up slowly, hand dragging across his face, hair plastered to his forehead. He was burning from the inside out.

His heart wouldn’t slow. His breath wouldn’t come steady. It felt like his skin didn’t fit quite right- like he’d woken up still dreaming.

“Jesus Christ,” he muttered.

His voice cracked in the middle, dry and jagged. He blinked, and for a moment he saw the kitchen again. The counter. The notebook. His mother’s voice like background noise in a horror film. He rubbed his temples, elbows on his knees, and looked down at Otto.

“You’ve got no idea what you signed up for, huh?” he said quietly.

Otto stretched, unbothered, pressing a warm, heavy body against his thigh like an anchor. James looked at the clock. 4:12am. Too early to be awake. Too late to fall back asleep.

And still, he didn’t hesitate. Not for a second. He reached for the tablet on his nightstand. Fingers trembling, not from fear, but from *need* .

Just one look. Just one feed. That’s all he needed.

The glow of the CCTV lit his face in cold white as the cameras loaded. “Come on, Will,” he whispered. “Be there.”

He didn’t even know what for. Just that he needed to *see* him. To remind himself that Will was real, that something in his life still made sense.

Or maybe, to remind himself that there were still things worth watching.

II

The hiss of the kettle filled the flat. James stood barefoot on the cold kitchen tiles, the hem of his black joggers dragging slightly, twisted from how he'd rolled out of bed without thinking. Otto sat on the countertop beside the sink, tail flicking lazily, eyes fixed on something James couldn't see.

The window above the sink was steamed slightly, grey rain painting the outside world in blurred watercolours. The sky was bruised and low, the kind of weather that made everything feel a little too quiet, like the city was holding its breath.

James wrapped both hands around his mug as he poured the hot water in, like maybe the heat would bleed into him and pull him out of the fog. Otto didn't expect anything, just blinked up at him like he knew. Like he always knew. The nightmare- or memory, rather- still lingered in the edges of his skin. His body remembered it even if his mind was trying to pretend it didn't. He opened his phone with one hand, scrolling through nothing. No texts. No stories. No missed calls.

Will. Already out. The timestamp was ten minutes ago. Blue hoodie. Headphones in. Backpack over one shoulder. Gone before James had even opened his eyes. His stomach curled slightly. Not jealousy, not quite, but he should have known. Should have seen.

Otto meowed quietly, a low and unimpressed sound, and James gave him a distracted scratch behind the ears. His thumb hovered over Will's name in his messages. He didn't type anything. Because just then, his phone buzzed.

A text. From Will.

Distraction:

'You in today?'

Three words. Casual. Easy. He stared at it for longer than he needed to. Read it again, then again. You in today. Like James was just... someone to drop in on. Like this was normal. He leaned against the counter, mug forgotten, and typed back.

James:

'Unfortunately. Otto's very demanding.'

He hit send. Waited. Fiddled with the handle of his mug. Otto gave a soft little chirp, as if encouraging him to get it together. The reply was instant.

Distraction:

‘Sounds like him. Mind if I drop by? Got something for you.’

James smiled. It was small. A curve of the lips that felt alien on his face at this hour. He rubbed at his jaw, still feeling the ghost of bad sleep under his skin. Drop by. He could’ve laughed- Will made it sound so easy, so light. Like he hadn’t shaken James’ entire sense of reality two nights ago.

James:

‘Sure. Come whenever.’

He set his phone down, face up this time. Just in case Will said something else. But nothing came. Just the buzz of the kettle still cooling. The tick of the clock above the fridge. Otto, now licking his paw like royalty. “You,” he muttered to Otto, “need to be on your best behaviour. Don’t make me look desperate.”

Otto blinked at him. James shook his head, and tried not to look at the front door like it was about to burst open with meaning. Because it was just a visit. Just something for him. Nothing more.

Right?

The knock came earlier than he expected. Too early. James flinched. His mug clinked against the counter as he set it down too fast. Another knock- sharper this time. Rapid. Urgent. *Will-knock.*

“Oh for f-” he hissed, looking down at himself. Joggers. No shirt. Hair in chaos. No time.

He sprinted- actual, full jog- to the door, heart thudding, one hand raking through his hair like that would *fix* anything. It didn’t. If anything, it made him look more rabid. Another knock.

“Alright, alright, calm down,” he muttered as he reached the door, pausing just long enough to take a breath and press his body behind it before cracking it open, just a sliver. Just enough for his head and maybe some of his chest to peek through. Will stood there, rain-flecked and bright-eyed, hoodie zipped halfway and cheeks pink from the wind. His hand still hovered in midair like he’d been ready to knock again.

“Jesus,” James said, breathless, leaning harder behind the door. “You in a rush or something? Wasn’t expecting a *raid* .”

Will grinned, of course he did, and tried to peek around the door. “I figured you wouldn’t mind if I came by early.”

“I do mind. I’m half-naked.” His tone was dry but playful. Mostly.

Will raised a brow. “Only half?”

James narrowed his eyes. “Don’t get brave, Lenney.”

But Will was already laughing, leaning against the doorframe like he *knew* he’d caught James off guard and was soaking in every second of it.

James blinked. His brain caught up.
Oh god, *he didn’t have a shirt on.*

He adjusted the door slightly to block more of his chest, suddenly aware of the way his skin must look- pale and marked with old, pale lines, collarbone sharp, hipbones half visible beneath the waistband of the joggers. Hair sticking up in eight different directions like a static explosion.

“I’m letting you in,” he said flatly. “But don’t say anything.”

Will smirked. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

James stepped back and let the door swing open wider- *but not too wide* - before quickly moving toward the kitchen in retreat, muttering something about “needing caffeine to deal with this nonsense.”

Behind him, the door clicked shut, and he heard the unmistakable sound of Will kicking off his shoes like he owned the place. James, still shirtless and vaguely offended by his own state, refused to look back. Instead, he reached for two mugs and said, “You better have brought something *spectacular* , Lenney.”

Because if Will was barging into his morning unannounced and seeing him like this, then he better damn well make it worth it. Will stepped inside with all the casual audacity of someone who *definitely* hadn’t just caught the man he was semi-flirting with half-naked. He sauntered toward the kitchen like he belonged there, tossing a brown paper bag onto the counter beside the mugs with a smirk still plastered across his rain-speckled face.

“You’re lucky I’m sweet,” he said, unbothered, peeling the bag open. “Blueberry muffins. Big ones. Still warm. I risked my life cutting an old lady in the queue for them.”

James snorted despite himself. “Heart of gold, you.”

Will leaned against the counter like a romcom extra and plucked a muffin from the bag, holding it up like it was some grand romantic gesture. “Thought you’d appreciate a little morning sugar,” he said, grin widening, “though, looks like you already brought dessert.”

James froze mid-reach for the coffee jar. His fingers hovered in the air, brain buffering.
He turned, slow and wary, meeting Will’s eyes. Will’s gaze dropped to his bare chest for the *tiniest* second before returning to James’ face, brows lifted in mock innocence. The smirk stayed. James turned back to the coffee, internally screaming.

This wasn’t the plan. This *wasn’t* how Will was meant to see him. Not like this, shirtless, sleep-warm, hair wild and sticking up like a *madman* in a panic. Not… real. This was too

close . Too *raw* . Too James.

He swallowed, eyes on the granules in the jar like they might rearrange his personality.

“Don’t-” he started, then paused, running a hand through his hair again like he might flatten the disaster that was his entire *existence* . “I wasn’t- I didn’t exactly plan to look like a fucking naked scarecrow when you showed up, alright?”

Will laughed. Soft, genuine. “You don’t. You look…” He paused. “Domestic.”

Still, the panic licked at the edges of his chest. That Will had seen him like this, unguarded, flesh and flaws on display. He wanted to make some joke about his body being a tragic poem, about how he used to be larger, or better, or just… more of whatever a person was *meant* to be.

But he didn’t. Instead, he busied himself making coffee and said, quieter now, “You’re not supposed to see me like this. Not yet.”

Will tilted his head slightly. “Why not?”

James shrugged, pouring boiling water into the mugs like it might drown the question. “Because this is the part of the film where the lead still has their shirt on. The vulnerable body shot isn’t supposed to happen until act two. With *mood lighting* .”

Will smiled softly, and James didn’t look up to see it. He just stirred sugar into both mugs, pulse skittering like a warning.

Will took a slow bite of muffin, eyes still scanning James like he was a particularly fascinating museum exhibit someone had failed to label properly. “Shame, really,” he said through a mouthful, “I was kinda hoping this place would be a mess. Just to knock you down a peg.”

James snorted and shoved a mug into his hand. “You think muffins buy you that kind of honesty?”

Will held up his free hand. “Muffins are currency, Marriott. This one’s practically a fifty.”

They leaned against opposite countertops, a mirror of each other- one in joggers and defiance, the other in jeans and lingering rain. For a second, it was quiet, easy. The domestic hum of a kettle settling and two bodies just… being. Breathing. Watching.

James took a sip of his coffee, then tilted his head, eyes flicking downward. “I forget how big I am until mornings like this,” he muttered absently, glancing at his chest, his arms, the line of his stomach.

Will blinked, mid-sip. “Big?”

James shrugged with that hollow kind of laugh that didn’t go past the throat. “Yeah. You know. Like… lumbering. In the way. Not exactly ballerina material.”

Will's brows knit, chewing slowly as he stared at James- really stared. Not in that hungry, suggestive way. Not yet. Just… observant. Serious.

"That's not what I see."

James raised an eyebrow. "Oh yeah? What do *you* see, Lenney?"

Will licked sugar off his thumb in a way that should've been illegal before 10am, then smirked. "I see someone who could throw me over his shoulder without breaking a sweat," he said, "and who wears 'big lad' like it's the hottest accessory of 2025."

James flushed. *Actually* flushed. He tried to hide it behind his mug but Will caught it- *of course* he caught it- and grinned like he'd just won a bet with himself.

"I'm not even wearing a shirt," James mumbled.

Will took another bite of muffin, voice lighter now, teasing: "Exactly. I'm not complaining."

James let Will's grin hang in the air for a beat too long, then placed his coffee down with a quiet clink, fingers brushing the counter like he was dusting away the flirtation. He didn't look directly at Will when he spoke next, voice deceptively light:

"So…" A pause. "You remember much from the other night?"

Will blinked. "The bar?"

James nodded, keeping his tone flat. "Yeah. You, me, Mikey. Little triangle of chaos."

Will tilted his head slightly, like he was trying to gauge where this was going. "Some of it," he said cautiously, chewing the last of his muffin. "Enough to know I was drunk, but not like… collapsed-in-the-gutter drunk. Why?"

James shrugged. Shrugged too well. His nonchalance was practised, polished to a glint. "Just wondering if you remembered how chummy Mikey got. You know. With me."

Will's eyes narrowed ever so slightly, not suspicion, not yet. Just… focus. "You mean his jokes?"

James met his gaze now, finally, and tilted his head in a mirror of Will's. "If you can call them that."

There was a silence, thick, but not uncomfortable. It sat between them like a held breath. Will rubbed the back of his neck. "Mikey just likes to stir things. Doesn't mean anything."

James smiled then, just the edge of his mouth curving up, but his eyes stayed cool. "Oh, Lenney, *everything* means something."

Will blinked, caught off guard, but he covered it with a short laugh. "You're dramatic."

"And you're evasive."

“Touché.”

James sipped his coffee again, the warmth grounding him, though his thoughts had already darted back to that night- Mikey’s too-clean grin, his eyes watching James like they were playing the same game with different rules. He didn’t press it. Not yet. But the seed was there now, carefully planted. Will had watered it without even realising.

“Mikey’s just… protective. He’s always been like that.”

James tilted his head again, he was doing that a lot today, like he was trying to figure out what part of Will’s brain he should sink his teeth into. “Protective?”

Will nodded, still relaxed. “Yeah. I’m the flighty one, apparently. Fall into things. Trust too easy.”

James set his mug down gently. Too gently. “Huh,” he said, almost thoughtfully. “And what exactly is it he thinks you need protecting from?”

Will gave him a look. One of those *don’t play dumb* looks. But James just blinked at him, all faux-innocence with something glinting underneath. Will sighed, folding his arms. “From getting too involved with people like you.”

James barked a laugh, sharp and delighted. “People like me?” He stepped off the counter. “Go on then. Enlighten me. What *kind* of person am I, Will?”

Will gave a short laugh, more breath than sound. “You know exactly what I mean.”

“Oh, but I don’t,” James replied, voice lilting, deceptively light. “Because to me, I’m charming. Mysterious. Bit odd, maybe, but nothing worth installing a warning label over.”

Will rolled his eyes. “You’re intense. And you know it.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

“Didn’t say that.”

James narrowed his eyes. “But Mikey did.”

Will sighed, finally meeting his gaze. “You don’t think it’s a bit much sometimes? The way you are? You just… you don’t make it easy to know what you’re thinking. You’re hard to read.”

“That’s rich coming from you,” James shot back, voice low.

Will ignored it. “It’s not bad. It’s just… different.”

“‘Different,’” James echoed, taking a step closer now, his voice a little colder. “You know, that’s what people always say right before they bolt. ‘He’s just… different.’”

Will looked at him, finally steady again. “I’m not bolting.”

“No,” James said, his mouth twitching at the corners. “But Mikey would like you to.”

Will didn’t answer. James smiled wider. “People like me. That’s what he said?”

Will gave the barest nod. James retrieved and raised his mug to his lips, then paused, looking at Will over the rim. “Funny. People like me are usually exactly what people like you come running back to.”

Will straightened, the tension flaring across his shoulders. “Okay, can we not make this a thing?” he said, reaching into the paper bag on the counter and tossing a muffin at James with more force than strictly necessary. “Eat your emotional support carbs and relax.”

James caught it easily, but didn’t unwrap it right away. He narrowed his eyes, the muffin resting like an accusation in his palm. “So now I’m emotionally unstable and hungry? Cheers, Lenney. Real kind.”

Will shrugged with mock innocence, peeling the wrapper off his own muffin with dramatic flair. “Just saying, if the shoe fits.”

James scoffed but it didn’t land with his usual confidence. Something brittle hid under the sound. He stared at the muffin again, fingers slowly twisting the paper like it was something that needed dismantling. He hated this. Not the joking- he could handle that. But the implication behind it. The ease with which Will could say he was “weird” or “intense” or “hard to read.”

It clawed at something old and raw. Something that had been said in louder voices, in rooms with slammed doors and broken notebooks. People like *him* were always the problem. Too quiet, too odd, too much. He’d spent years armouring himself against that- building the sharp tongue, the smirk, the effortless performance. He didn’t want Will to see past that. He couldn’t afford it.

He bit into the muffin just to shut himself up.

“I’m not *weird,* by the way,” he muttered, mouth full, voice clipped. “I’m observant. Different doesn’t mean dangerous.”

Will’s expression softened a bit. “I never said you were dangerous.”

James looked up, chewing slower now. “But he did.”

Will hesitated. “Mikey just- he doesn’t know you.”

“Well, he should be grateful for that.”

Will opened his mouth to reply but shut it again, staring down at his half-eaten muffin like it might offer a script. Silence settled, syrupy and thick. James swallowed the bite with difficulty and wiped his hand on a napkin he didn’t remember picking up. He turned toward the window, the morning light streaking faint gold across his bare collarbone.

He couldn't stand the idea of Will seeing him the way his parents had. Couldn't bear the echo of *"what's wrong with you?"* hanging behind Will's teasing voice. The moment Will thought he was *too much* - too twisted, too intense- that was the moment he'd vanish. And James wasn't going to be left again.

Not by him.

Will took another bite of his muffin, chewing slowly, like he was thinking too carefully for someone who claimed this wasn't a big deal. His eyes flicked to James again- half a glance, but laced with something unspoken. It annoyed James. Everything about him was too casual right now. Like Will had no idea what kind of line he was toeing.

Then Will said, almost too casually, "You know, for someone who watches people so closely, you're not very good at knowing how you come across."

James blinked. His spine stiffened as if the words had physically struck him. He turned his head slowly, eyes narrowing with surgical precision.

"The fuck's your problem recently?"

The words came out too sharp, too fast- like glass breaking. Otto stirred on the windowsill, tail flicking. Will's eyes widened a fraction. His mouth opened like he might backtrack, but nothing came out. James was already halfway to him, muffin discarded on the counter behind him, hands braced on the edge.

"No, seriously. Is this a new thing? You poking at me just to see if I'll snap?" His voice was calm, but that calm was jagged. Pulled too tight. "Because you're doing a stellar job, Will. Gold star. Really pushing the boundaries of friendship here."

Will blinked again, caught between defensiveness and guilt. "I didn't mean it like that," he muttered, but the words sounded hollow. Lazy.

James tilted his head, eyes sharp like cracked glass catching the light. "No? Then how *did* you mean it?"

Will shrugged, arms folding, lips pressing into a line. "You act like you're above everything. Like you know everything. Like you're always watching, but never actually in it. It's just- hard to know when anything you say is *real.* "

James laughed. A single, mirthless sound. "You mean, *you* don't like not being the smartest person in the room."

Will flinched. James clocked it. Logged it. Stored it away like ammunition. And just like that, the air between them thickened. The tension wasn't sexual anymore- it was flammable. The kind of silence that came just before someone said something unforgivable.

Will scoffed, but there was no real humour in it. "You really think that, don't you? That I can't stand not being the smartest in the room. God, James, do you ever hear yourself?"

James leaned in, slow, predator-smooth. “Do you ever listen to yourself? You think you're charming because you deflect everything with sarcasm. You wear it like armour and act like nobody notices.”

“I’d rather be sarcastic than whatever the hell you are,” Will bit, pushing off the counter. “You're cold. Like there’s a wall and I don’t even know what’s behind it- just mirrors and silence and all that smug superiority.”

“Oh, please,” James snapped, voice low and venomous. “Don’t act like you’re some kind of victim in this. You like it. You *like* dancing around me, playing your little games, pretending you’re confused about the rules when you helped write them.”

Will’s jaw clenched. “What rules? There are no rules with you. You just watch and manipulate and then act confused when people get hurt.”

James barked a bitter laugh. “You’re one to talk. You show up uninvited, drink my coffee, flirt like it’s an accident, and then twist the knife when I finally call you out. You want attention until it actually matters, then you panic.”

“I didn’t ask you to obsess over me!” Will shouted, finally losing that cool exterior. “I didn’t ask you to *watch* me.”

That hit the nerve. The buried one. The one James kept stitched behind every breath. James’s voice dropped. Dangerous quiet. “But you *liked* it. Didn’t you.”

Will hesitated, just half a beat too long. James saw it.

“You *liked* that I noticed things no one else did. That I remembered how you take your coffee, that I looked at you like you were art instead of flesh.”

“Don’t romanticise your control issues,” Will hissed. “It’s creepy.”

James took a single step forward. The gap between them vanished. “So leave,” he whispered. “Walk out. Stop replying. Block my number. If it’s so fucking creepy, *run away* , Will.”

Will didn’t move. Didn’t blink. Didn’t breathe.

And in that charged silence, James smiled- not kindly. Not sweetly. But like someone who’d just confirmed exactly what he suspected. “You won’t,” James said softly. “Because you love it. You love the danger. You want to get close to the fire, just to see if you’ll get burned.”

Will opened his mouth. Closed it again. Then- finally- he muttered, “You’re insane.”

James tilted his head. “And yet, here you are.”

Their chests rose and fell in sync. Matching breaths. Matching rage. The room was quiet except for the hum of the fridge and the blood roaring in both their ears. It was a standoff dressed up as intimacy. A seduction wrapped in war.

Will shifted his weight, eyes flickering with something that wasn't quite pity, but was just close enough to make James's stomach twist. And then, so casually, so carelessly, he said it. "Maybe Mikey's right about you."

The air between them snapped tight, like something cosmic had *cracked* , and Will, poor sweet Will, didn't even realise he'd just stepped on the landmine.

"Right," James echoed, voice like a storm before it hits. "Right about *what* , exactly?"

Will hesitated. "That you're... intense. Controlling. Maybe a bit too… interested."

James didn't answer. He turned away instead, his jaw locking so tight you could hear the pressure hum in his teeth. He moved to the sink, his hands flat on the counter like he needed to physically anchor himself.

"You know what's funny?" he said, too quietly. Will didn't reply. "Funny," James repeated, louder now, turning slowly to face him. "Is *Mikey* - Mikey who doesn't know me. Who's known you longer than I've even been allowed to breathe near you- *he's* the expert now? He gets to tell you what I am?"

"James-"

"No, fuck that," James snapped, voice suddenly boiling over, volcanic and raw. "You want to talk about 'too interested'? Let's talk about *you* , Will. You flirt, you disappear, you let me kiss the hem of your attention and then act *shocked* when I want more."

"I never-"

"You *knew* what you were doing," James said, pointing at him now, finger trembling with rage he hadn't even known he'd been swallowing down. "You liked the attention. You loved being seen. Don't *you* dare pretend you didn't lap it up."

Will's mouth opened, but James was still going, venom dripping like tar.

"You parade Mikey around like some guard dog, let him growl at me in your shadow like it's noble- when really, you're just too much of a coward to admit you're scared of *what you want.* "

Will had already stepped forward, shaking his head, lips parting again and again- but James didn't *stop* .

"You don't need Mikey to protect you. You need him to tell you what to think-"

"-James-"

"You lap it up, Will. You let people orbit you, feed on it, and then act *innocent* -"

" *James-* "

"-you don't even *see* what you do to people, how you play them like-"

“ *What the fuck happened to you when you were a kid to fuck you up like this?!* ”

The room *ruptured* . Like the words themselves shattered the air between them. Will stood, flushed, chest rising and falling, eyes wild with adrenaline and something like disbelief, like he didn’t mean to say it but *meant every single word* . James didn’t even breathe. For a moment, the world tilted. And then-

“ *Don’t you fucking dare.* ”

He stepped forward. Not fast. Not loud. But slow- *lethal* . Like the calm in an execution chamber. “Don’t you ever speak about my childhood like you *know* it. Don’t you throw that shit at me like it’s a weapon.”

Will froze.

“You want to know what happened to me?” James said, voice low and twisted, cracking under the weight of something that had festered for *years* . “You want a story, Will? A trauma to pin on your wall like a charity case? Here’s one for you: I stopped crying when I was ten because my father told me boys who cry end up in ditches. I used to draw people- just to *feel* something- and he tore it up and called me a freak. Every bruise I got, I earned- for being too weird, too quiet, too *me* .”

Will didn’t speak. James stepped closer. His voice was trembling now, but not with sadness. With barely-caged *violence* . “You think *this* is bad? This version of me- tamed, polite, curated just for *you* ? Will, I’ve spent *years* building myself from the ground up. Brick by bloody brick. So don’t stand there and psychoanalyse me like I’m a dog off its leash.”

Another step. Now they were chest-to-chest. Nose-to-nose. The air between them buzzed with static. James tilted his head. “You don’t want to know what happened to me. Because once you know, you don’t *get* to act superior anymore. You don’t get to joke. You don’t get to pretend like this is just flirtation. You *lose* .”

And that’s what this was really about, wasn’t it? James saw it in Will’s eyes. “I scare you,” James whispered. “Because I see *everything* . I see *you* . And you don’t like what that means, do you?”

Will didn’t back down. Not this time. His voice was quieter, but sharper- razor-edged and raw with heat. “I knew you were fucked up from something,” he said, tone trembling under restraint. “But every time I tried to get you to open up, you shut it down. You’d snap. You’d snarl. You’d twist everything into some weird power play. You *never* said fucking anything.”

His eyes burned. James saw it- the frustration, the heartbreak, the endless push-pull of being dragged into James’ orbit and flung back out again like gravity didn’t mean shit. James’s mouth curled. “Oh, wouldn’t Mikey *lap* this up,” he said, voice dry as bone. “Front row seat to the emotionally constipated villain’s tragic origin story. Bet he’d be *thrilled* to know he was right about me all along.”

Otto- silent up until now- let out a low, rumbling hiss from the counter. It startled them both. The cat arched slightly, tail flicking like a warning flag. A snarl, quiet but pointed, aimed

directly at Will.

James glanced at Otto and then slowly turned back, the corner of his mouth twitching upward- not in amusement, but in something colder. Something *satisfied* . “Even my *cat* thinks you’re overstepping,” he muttered.

Will’s jaw flexed. He looked at Otto, then at James, and- God- *he didn’t know what to say anymore* . The game they’d been playing was no longer flirtation, no longer mysterious smiles and innuendos disguised as banter. It was *real* . This was the undercurrent they’d been skating over, pretending it wasn’t lava until it licked at their ankles.

“I wanted to help you,” Will said finally, quieter now. “I *still* want to. But you make it *impossible.* ”

James laughed once- short, humorless. “That’s because you’re not trying to help me, Will,” he said. “You’re trying to fix me. And I’m not broken in the way you want me to be.”

Will opened his mouth, but James didn’t let him speak.

“You want to play therapist, saviour, knight in pastel hoodies? Save it. You don’t know the first thing about the kind of damage I carry.”

Otto, still bristled, padded over to James and pressed against his leg like a warning. James reached down and absentmindedly brushed a hand over his fur- gentle, instinctive. A contrast to the way his words sliced. Will’s lip curled like he might say something else- but then didn’t.

He just *looked* at James. Not with fear. Not with pity. But something far worse. Like he saw James *clearly* now. And James… he hated that. Will didn’t move. Not toward the door. Not toward James. Just stood there, breathing like he’d run a mile, with his jaw clenched and his fingers twitching at his sides. Then- quietly, but not softly:

“You think I don’t know you’ve got a mask on?”

James stilled. His eyes narrowed. He didn’t like that tone. That calm, sure, *dangerously certain* tone. Will didn’t wait for permission to keep talking.

“Even back at the café. That first day. I *knew.* You smiled too much. Spoke too carefully. Like someone trying on a personality in a dressing room. And I remember thinking- *that’s not him.* That’s not the guy under there. That’s not the real face.”

James didn’t blink.

“It was like watching a performance,” Will continued, eyes glinting now. “And not even a good one. You were so- *intentional.* Every word, every look, like you were carving a version of yourself out of marble and hoping I wouldn’t notice the cracks.”

His voice was low now. Razor-thin. “But I *did* notice.”

James shifted, just slightly, jaw tightening. The air was thick- stale and hot and humming. He could feel Otto tense beside him like a live wire.

“So go ahead,” Will said. “Hide behind the sarcasm. Talk about Mikey. Play the puppet master. But don’t act like I don’t see it. You’ve got a mask on, James. You always have.”

And just like that- Will stood there, arms crossed, eyes unwavering, and James…
He felt it. That flicker of cold. Like someone had finally reached under the bed and grabbed the monster’s wrist.

James didn’t speak. He couldn’t. Not yet. Not with the blood rushing in his ears like a violent tide, not with Will’s words bouncing around his skull like bullets ricocheting off something already cracked. *He noticed.* Of course he noticed. Of course he did. James wasn’t as good as he thought he was- he never had been. He’d built this persona like a house of mirrors, infinite and sharp-edged, and somehow Will had walked straight through it, eyes open. And maybe- maybe his parents had been right. Maybe he *wasn’t* good enough. Not then, not now. Not with the masks, not without them. No matter how many times he reshaped himself, rewrote himself, rebranded, reframed- he always cracked at the same seams. His father had called him wrong, a freak, a watcher, a *problem* , and maybe that stuck deeper than he let on. Because he still *felt* like a problem. Like a boy playing a man, reading his lines from memory, trying to remember the cues and the inflections and still tripping over his own goddamn performance. And Will- *Will* had seen through it. Just like that. Just like *them.* And fuck- he hadn’t spiralled like this since the summer of ‘20. Since the last time he’d let the mask drop too hard, too fast, and everything splintered in his hands like cheap glass. And now it was happening again. *Again.* His chest was tight. His jaw locked. And suddenly it felt like there wasn’t enough air in the room, not for him, not for Will, not for Otto crouched beside him like a tiny, furious guardian. He blinked hard. Once. Twice. No tears. Just static. Just the overwhelming, unbearable ache of *not being enough.*

James’ hands trembled, subtle at first- a whisper of a quake, the kind you convince yourself isn’t real- but then stronger, more insistent, like a low drumbeat in his veins he couldn’t drown out. In his head, he reached up, fingers clawing at the edges of his mask, the carefully sculpted façade he wore like armor, like a goddamn second skin. He needed it back. Desperately. Like a drowning man gasping for air, he wanted to hide this spiral, bury it under layers of sarcasm, control, and cold calculation. But the tremble betrayed him, dancing just beneath the surface, betraying everything he’d fought so hard to keep locked away.

Fuck. He *couldn’t* hide it.

His breath hitched. The cool, clinical mask started to crack around the edges, splintering under the weight of a storm he thought he had mastered long ago. This wasn’t just a twitch; it was a damn earthquake inside him, rattling loose the fragile control he’d spent years building. He swallowed hard, fingers still shaking as they hovered near his face, unsure whether to press the mask back in place or rip it off and let the chaos out.

Will stepped forward- slowly, like approaching a wounded animal. The anger had drained from his features, replaced now by something softer. Wary, but present. Concerned.

"James?" he said, voice lower. Not sharp. Not biting. Just… real. James didn't look at him. He couldn't. His jaw was clenched so tightly he thought it might splinter. He could feel Will's eyes on him- not burning like judgment, but worse: like *care* . It made something squirm inside him.

Will tried again, gentler this time. "Hey. Talk to me."

James flinched. And Will *noticed* . Of course he did.

"I didn't mean-" Will started, but then cut himself off, because yeah, maybe he *did* mean to provoke him, but not to break him like this. Not to watch the most composed man he'd ever met unravel thread by trembling thread. "James, are you- are you okay?"

The silence sat thick between them.

"I'm fine," James croaked finally, except his voice cracked in the middle like glass under pressure. It wasn't convincing. Not to Will. Not even to Otto, who was curled on the counter now with his ears pinned back like he knew the storm was still hovering.

Will took another half-step closer. "You're not fine."

James gave a dry, bitter laugh that didn't even make it all the way out of his mouth.

"No," Will said, firmer now. "You're not."

James lifted his head just enough to look at him from beneath his lashes, eyes glassy, but narrowed- like he was suspicious of the kindness. Like he didn't know what to do with it. Will, for once, didn't push. Didn't joke. Didn't do anything except *stand there* . Solid. Present. And fuck, that was worse somehow. Because James didn't know how to handle people staying.

Will let out a small breath, then- like it cost him something- said, "Come on. Let's… sit down, yeah?" His tone was steady but low, cautious, like he was coaxing a skittish fox out of the underbrush.

James blinked at him. Just sit down? That was the suggestion? That simple?

But Will didn't fill the silence with any more noise. He didn't push. He just gestured slightly toward the couch with a tilt of his head, taking a careful step backwards like he knew sudden movements might break something fragile. Someone fragile. And James… well, he didn't nod. He didn't say anything. But his legs moved anyway.

Will crossed the room first, lowering himself into the corner of the couch with a soft exhale, hands clasped between his knees. He didn't lounge, didn't sprawl cockily like usual. He just *waited* - his gaze flicking up only when James finally sat, a little distance away, back rigid, eyes on the far wall.

James didn't even know why he sat. Why he followed. Maybe because Will had said it like a kindness, not a command. Maybe because part of him wanted to fall into something warm

and low-pressure and *normal* , even if his chest was still tight, like there were claws around his lungs.

Will broke the quiet eventually. His voice was soft, like a shared secret: "We don’t have to talk about anything heavy. We can just… be. If you want."

And that might’ve been the kindest thing anyone had ever said to James Marriott.

III

The fluorescent lighting in the supermarket felt like an interrogation lamp, but James kept his expression smooth, one hand on the trolley handle as he trailed behind Will, who was currently debating the merits of sourdough vs tiger bread like it was a critical life decision.

“There’s an obvious winner, you know,” James drawled, nudging the trolley forward with the heel of his boot. “Hint: it’s named after a cat.”

Will shot him a look over his shoulder. “ Don’t disrespect sourdough. It’s elite.”

James raised a brow. “Your standards are low, Lenney.”

“And yet I invited you here.”

Touché.

The aisle buzzed softly with the hum of fridges and distant conversation. James pretended to scan the shelf, but his eyes kept drifting sideways- toward Will. The way he moved. The way his fingers tapped distractedly against the front of the trolley when he was thinking. The way he said “ excuse me ” to strangers like it was a performance, a little grin tucked into the corners of his mouth.

He was doing it again. Watching. Will reached for a carton of eggs, then turned. “You don’t cook, do you?”

James gave a slow blink. “I can cook, and I reheat. That's culinary effort.”

Will laughed. “So you’re useless unless there’s a microwave involved?”

“And WiFi. Don't forget my natural environment.”

Will chuckled again, dropping the eggs into the cart. “I should make you dinner sometime. Proper food. Something to prove I’m not the one with terrible taste.”

James tilted his head, curious. “Guilty conscience, William?”

That earned him a sideways glance, a flicker of something unreadable in Will’s eyes- guilt, maybe. Or nerves. Will shrugged. “Maybe. Felt like you could use a bit of normal.”

James didn’t respond at first. He just stared at a shelf of tinned tomatoes like they held the answer to his crumbling mental state. Because sure, this was normal. Two guys in a shop. Picking bread. Arguing about eggs. Pretending the air between them wasn’t still thick with everything left unsaid. Still, James let himself enjoy it. For now. He reached out and grabbed a jar of pesto, tossing it into the cart. “You’re paying, right?”

Will rolled his eyes. “Only because you made me feel bad enough to beg you to come grocery shopping with me.”

James smiled faintly. *Good,* he thought. *Let the guilt keep you close.*

James’ phone buzzed against the metal of the trolley, a quick, muted *thrum* that barely registered above the supermarket’s background hum. He glanced down instinctively. The screen lit up with a familiar notification: "Motion detected - Hallway Camera."

His heart kicked once, then settled into a hard, deliberate rhythm. He tapped the alert.

Before opening it, he flicked his gaze sideways- Will was mid-conversation with an elderly woman by the mushrooms, saying something about how his nan used to pickle her own. Oblivious. Distracted. Good. James opened the feed. The hallway camera blinked into view. And there he was. Mikey.

Ginger, grinning, stupidly casual, knocking on Will’s door with his stupid knuckles, rocking on his heels like he belonged there. James’ grip on the phone tightened, joints going white. Mikey knocked again. Then leaned forward slightly, trying to peek through the peephole. James could see the angle of it, the way Mikey stepped back, checked his phone- probably texting Will. *Now.* At this exact moment.

James watched him wait a few more seconds before finally turning, glancing down the corridor, and walking out of frame. He locked the phone. Slipped it casually into his pocket.

Will turned back toward him, placing two packs of pasta into the trolley. “I got the tagliatelle. The fresh one. You’re not gluten-free or some weird shit, right?”

James smiled. “Not at all. I’m perfectly normal.”

Will’s phone buzzed a moment later- that familiar vibration against denim. James clocked it immediately, of course he did. He didn’t *look* like he clocked it, no- he kept his gaze firmly on a jar of sun-dried tomatoes like it was the most intellectually stimulating object he’d ever encountered. But he was watching. Will pulled his phone out of his back pocket, eyes flicking to the screen. A message preview lit up; James caught the flash of a name.

Mikey.

Bingo.

Will’s thumb hovered. His lips pressed together in something caught between annoyance and indecision. Then, as if remembering James was next to him- no, *because* James was next to him- he hesitated. Just for a second. His eyes lifted, and they met James'. It was brief. Barely even contact. But it was enough. James raised an eyebrow, the corner of his mouth twitching up in the smallest, most knowing smirk. Will looked back at the phone.

And then he shoved it into his coat pocket without replying. No expression. Just a subtle stiffening of the shoulders as he reached instead for a tin of chopped tomatoes, like *that* was

the task that suddenly required his full emotional attention. Inside, James lit up. Look who's got Will now.

Will cleared his throat, the sound a little too pointed, a little too *loud* for a simple aisle conversation. He kept his gaze on the tinned goods like he was avoiding a minefield of eye contact, but his voice came out casual- *trying* for casual, anyway.

"So… do you, like, have any weird dietary requirements?" he asked, tossing it out like he was asking about the weather, like he hadn't just shoved Mikey's text into his pocket like a live grenade.

James didn't answer right away. He looked at Will instead. Just *looked* at him- long enough that Will shifted on his feet, his grip tightening slightly around a tin of chickpeas. "Are you asking because you're cooking for me," James said, tone slow, deliberate, and layered with something *just* this side of flirtation, "or because you're scared I'll judge you for buying too many frozen pizzas?"

Will made a face, that half-smirk that said *shut up, you're not wrong* , and rolled his eyes as he dumped the tin in his basket. "I'm just being considerate," he said, brushing off the tension like flour from his sleeves. "You don't strike me as a gluten-free, almond-quinoa type, but I figured I should check."

James grinned, lazy, confident, just a touch sharp. "No allergies. No intolerances. Just a healthy fear of overcooked pasta and emotional vulnerability."

Will huffed out a laugh and shook his head, but he was definitely still avoiding James' eyes. Skittish little fox. James was practically basking in it. "You *are* weird," Will muttered, half under his breath, but there was no venom behind it. Just something softer. Almost… entertained.

James tilted his head. "Weird is charming when it's packaged right."

Will looked up at him- and there it was, that flicker of tension in his gaze again. Maybe he was remembering the night on the couch. The way their knees had touched. The pastry moan. The weight of James' stare. He looked away just as fast.

James smiled to himself and casually plucked a packet of linguine off the shelf. Smooth with his tongue, indeed.

IIII

The plates clinked gently against the wooden table as Will set them down, one in front of James, one across from it, just enough distance for plausible deniability. The room smelled like garlic, tomatoes, and something herby, like oregano or… effort.

James, already lounging at the dining table like he *owned* it, leaned back slightly in his chair, letting his eyes drift down to the plate, then up, slowly, to the centre of the table. His gaze settled on the single, sad little unlit candle. Blackened wick. Decorative glass. Unused. Unlit. *Untouched* .

He arched an eyebrow, lips quirking with amusement. “Wow,” he drawled, crossing one leg over the other and resting his chin in his hand, elbow perched casually on the table. “Is this where I pretend not to notice the romantic undertone… or do you want me to light it for dramatic effect?”

Will, who was mid-sit and just about to tuck his chair in, blinked. His ears went red first. Then his cheeks. Then his whole damn soul. “Oh, fuck off,” he muttered, reaching for his fork in a desperate act of distraction. “It’s decorative. I got it from a market. It smells like vanilla and probably disappointment.”

James let the implication sink in before he smirked and nudged his pasta bowl slightly closer. “You sure you didn’t set the mood just in case? You *were* cutting basil like you were auditioning for *MasterChef* .”

Will gestured at him with his fork, barely restraining a grin. “Eat your food before I take the candle and bludgeon you with it.”

James chuckled low in his throat and twirled some linguine around his fork. *A date?* No. Will wouldn’t say that. Couldn’t say that. But still- the candle. The plating. The flush. James could smell the subtext from a mile away.

He took a bite. Delicious. This was going to be *fun* .

James twirled his fork lazily, letting the pasta drip slightly back into the bowl, before casually lifting it, not to eat, but to *gesture* . He angled it toward the window beside them, elbow on the table like this was just idle chatter, like he hadn’t spent the entire dinner cataloguing every microexpression Will made.

“That light there,” he said, pointing the fork through the glass at the window directly opposite- his flat, unmistakably, glowing low and warm from the living room. “Left it on for Otto.”

Will leaned just slightly to look, chewing slowly. “You did?”

“Mhm,” James hummed, eyes gleaming. “If you look closely…” he angled his head, chin up like he was inspecting something from afar- “you can just about see his silhouette. That’s him. Sitting in the window. Watching us.”

Will choked on his pasta- delicately, like a posh cat surprised by a cucumber. James grinned wider. “That’s the thing about cats,” he added, voice low and lilting, “they always know when something’s happening.” A beat. “Or when someone’s moved in a little too close.”

Will turned back to his plate with an awkward little laugh, but James kept watching him- sharp, knowing. The window behind him glinted faintly in the lamplight, and somewhere, across the street, a pair of feline eyes blinked slowly in return.

Will scoffed lightly, nudging his bowl with the back of his spoon. “It’s not a date,” he said, far too quickly, like he’d rehearsed it the second James so much as glanced at the candle.

James tilted his head, lips parting around the edge of his fork. “Didn’t say it was.”

Will’s eyes flicked to the unlit candle again, traitorously. “You implied it.”

“Mmm. Maybe,” James murmured, setting his fork down with the quietest clink against ceramic. Under the table, he shifted his feet slightly. The space between them wasn’t much, just enough to be plausible, just enough to pretend.

Just enough that when the side of his foot brushed against Will’s, it could still be written off as accidental. Except it wasn’t. Will blinked, glanced up, mouth twitching like he was about to speak, but he didn’t move his foot away.

So James pressed just a little further. A slow nudge, toe-to-toe, heel-to-arch. “I mean,” James drawled, voice all velvet, “if it *were* a date- would that be so terrible?”

Will looked down at his plate, and then back up, eyes sharp and unreadable, but his foot still hadn’t moved. And under the flickering kitchen light and the soft domestic silence, the table between them may as well have been paper-thin.

Without breaking eye contact, James slid a hand into the pocket of his cardigan, slow and deliberate, like a magician preparing his final act. Out came a slim, matte black lighter. He spun it once between his fingers, cocked a brow, then leaned forward with the lazy confidence of a man who’d already won.

The flame flicked to life with a soft *shhhk* , and he tilted it toward the untouched candle in the centre of the table. The wick caught instantly, casting a warm flicker between them.

“There,” he murmured, voice a low drawl as he sank back into his chair. “Since you forgot to finish setting the scene.”

Will stared at the candle for a second too long, then at James, something unreadable flickering in his expression. James smiled, wide and charming, and gestured to the pasta. “You clearly felt guilty for messing with my head, so you made me dinner. That’s how

couples make up after a fight, isn't it?" He lifted his fork and twirled it lazily. "A candlelit apology."

Will barked a single, incredulous laugh, but the corner of his mouth twitched up. "You're being *very* confident tonight."

James stabbed a piece of penne, slow and purposeful. "Can you blame me?" he said, glancing down at their feet under the table before looking back up at Will with a pointed smirk. "You're letting me win."

Will shook his head, cheeks flushed, eyes narrowed in amusement, but he didn't move away. Not one inch. Will's gaze drifted up slowly, deliberate like a slow-motion spotlight scanning a masterpiece, landing on James' jawline, tracing down his neck, pausing at the curve of his collarbone just visible beneath the cardigan. His eyes flicked back up to James' face, sharp and teasing, but there was something darker under the surface, something charged.

James caught it. That look. Not fear. Not hesitation. No, Will was intrigued. Hungry, even.

James's leg slid forward almost imperceptibly under the table, the slowest, most calculated movement like a cat stalking its prey. He let his calf brush casually against Will's, just a whisper of contact at first- almost innocent, but loaded with meaning. His eyes never left Will's, watching every twitch, every flicker of reaction like a scientist cataloguing a rare phenomenon.

Will's breath hitched quietly, a sharp little catch that James heard clearly, as if it echoed in the tight space between them. The corner of Will's mouth twitched, struggling to keep that sly smirk firmly in place, but his eyes betrayed him, darkened with something electric, something hungry, and maybe just a little unsettled.

James's leg inched closer, a slow drag upward along Will's calf, deliberate and teasing, like he was mapping unspoken territories, testing boundaries. Will shifted slightly, the tension coiling in the air thicker, heavier, the kind of tension that doesn't need words to speak volumes.

James bit his lip, his heart hammering like a drum in a silent room. This was a game. A dance. And right now, he was the one leading.

Will's fingers brushed against the edge of the table, tight, hesitant- almost as if holding himself back from leaning into the unspoken promise hanging between them. He let the moment stretch out, savoring it, savoring Will's barely concealed desire, the way the smallest touch could unravel everything, like a thread pulling loose on a sweater.

James let that slow, teasing drag of his leg linger a moment longer before tilting his head with a smirk that was half-mocking, half-taunting. "Oh, what's happening to you, hmm? You starting to like this little game more than you're letting on?" His voice was silky, laced with that patronising edge like he was watching a kid figure out something they didn't expect to enjoy.

Will didn’t pull away. Didn’t flinch. Didn’t even shift to create distance. Nah, he stayed right there- knee pressed gently against James’s, eyes locked onto his with something dark and thrilling swirling beneath the surface.

That was the sign James was waiting for. The faint, unspoken surrender beneath the bravado. The silent admission that Will was all in, no matter how much he tried to play it cool.

Will’s eyes flicked nervously toward the window, then back to James as his smile faltered just a fraction. “Don’t want Otto watching us,” he muttered, voice low enough to be more a secret than a warning.

James cocked an eyebrow, leaning in just a little closer. “Watch what, exactly?”

Will’s fingers pushed his plate back with a soft scrape against the table, the movement small but charged- like he wanted the night to slide somewhere else entirely. He caught James’s gaze, “You know what.”

Chapter End Notes

The dinner I felt was somewhat necessary. It shows Will as feeling guilty, and keeps James in that illusion of safety. Will initiates softness, and James laps it up like a starving man. He believes just for a second that he's normal enough to be loved back, and maybe he is.

He's pathetically in love. That's terrifying.

And at the point in the start where the air was sucked out of the room- the question of James' childhood cracks his mask, and Will sees that truly.

I would apologise for the notebook incident, but it's for the plot I swear. This moment anchors James' possessiveness. His control. His obsession- they all trace back to when someone stole his sacred inner world and destroyed it. That notebook was his life, metaphorically, and it was beautiful and private. It was also obliterated by someone else's power. So now James destroys things first- a sick survival logic he's crafted.

But understandable, of course.

I wanted this chapter to be rich with warmth, softness and romantic vulnerability whilst also delving into cold panic, past trauma and psychological recoil.

Oh, I'm SO excited for what's to come.

Beautiful Trouble

Chapter Summary

I: 'Scream My Name' - Montell Fish
II: 'BLUE' - Billie Eilish
III: 'Dangerous' - Big Data, Joywave
IIII: 'A Little Bit of Trouble' - Tempesst

Chapter Notes

Warning: Part 'I' contains smut. I personally included this as I felt it was essential to the plot. However, if you wish not to read the smut, that it okay, and you can continue from part 'II'.

The response to my writing of James' trauma was everything I could have asked for. You're all super involved in not only the plot, but the psychological unravelling that's taking place. That mean's so much to me.

And the analysis of Otto? I'm so glad people are realising that he's a bigger character than just a passive animal.

-My comment reply which explains this:-

' He plays a bigger part in this than most people realise. James needs Otto in the same way that he needed his sister- except his sister isn't around, and Otto can't respond, so James creates his own responses for him. This is incredibly dangerous given James' (odd) motives and behaviours. He is utterly deluded but has nobody to set him straight- until Will, as we've seen, although he does humour the delusions a considerable amount.

The issue is with Otto, is that he is such a lifeline to James. By making Otto a character and not a passive entity, I have the dynamic twisted in such a way that you're almost rooting for Otto to speak back- tell James he's being fucking weird. But that obviously can't happen.

My favourite bit writing this is in my first draft of each chapter Otto is merely an object, and when I go back over my writing I enjoy adding little seeds of body language to Otto. Otto doesn't mean anything by his behaviour- he's a cat and he doesn't know what James is doing, not really. But James is so unstable that he creates his own interpretation of Otto and that fuels him to act a certain way.'

ENJOY!!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I

James didn’t wait. His mouth crashed onto Will’s, teeth scraping over swollen lips, tongues clashing like weapons in a war neither of them wanted to stop. His hands were everywhere- grabbing at shoulders, tracing wild lines down Will’s back, yanking the thin fabric of his shirt until it bunched beneath his fingers.

Will responded with a desperate groan, his own hands clawing at James’ waist, fingers digging into the fabric of his trousers like he needed to anchor himself before they both fell apart. They stumbled backward, knocking into the doorframe, the door swinging open with a loud bang against the wall. James shoved Will inside the Northern man’s bedroom, pressing him hard against the cool plaster as their bodies collided in a chaotic tangle. Hands slid under shirts, fingers hooked into jeans, skin burning skin beneath ragged breaths and sharp gasps. Will’s hips jerked up, grinding against James like a silent plea, teeth sinking into his lower lip as he fought to catch his breath. They fell onto the bed with a roughness that stole the air, limbs tangled, fingers digging into muscle and bone, mouths fierce and claiming. James’ hand found the back of Will’s neck, pulling him closer, voice a husky growl: “You have no idea how long I’ve waited for this.”

Will’s laugh was short, breathless, full of promise and something dangerously close to surrender. James’ fingers tangled in the hem of Will’s shirt, dragging it up slowly like he wanted to commit every inch of revealed skin to memory, to claim it with touch alone. But before he could speak, Will smirked, cheeky, breathless, flushed, and said, “Bet you've dreamt of this, haven’t you?”

James froze for half a second, the words landing like a punch to the gut and a kiss to the throat all at once.

Will tilted his head, still pinned beneath James, eyes glinting with that dangerous spark. “Bet you sat in that flat across the street watching me and imagining how I’d sound under you.”

James exhaled a low laugh- more of a growl, really- and dipped his head closer, lips brushing the shell of Will’s ear.

“You have no idea,” he whispered, the weight of truth dripping off every syllable like poison and honey. “You don’t even know the half of it.”

Will’s breath hitched. That cocky grin faltered just slightly. Just enough. But not for long. “Well,” Will murmured, voice low and taunting, “maybe tonight’s your big chance to stop imagining, stalker boy.”

Oh. He’d *earned* that.

James' grin turned feral.

"Careful," he murmured, mouth ghosting over Will's neck, "I'm not nearly as patient as I pretended to be."

And with that, they collided again- lips, hands, teeth, breath- like a match struck too close to a leaking gas pipe.

James didn't waste time with anything soft. Not tonight. His hands were already under Will's shirt, dragging it upwards with a greed he didn't bother hiding. Will helped- barely, clumsily- before tossing the fabric to the floor, forgotten like all their past restraint. James had always been good at watching. Quiet, meticulous, obsessive. But nothing- *nothing* - had prepared him for this. The real thing. Will, lit up in the muted glow of the bedroom lamp, all soft outlines and golden warmth, skin freckled and flushed from the heat of everything between them.

"You always this rough?" Will asked, breath catching as James bit at his collarbone, not bothering to answer. His fingers were working Will's belt, slow and unforgiving, like he wanted the sound of it unbuckling to echo. And it did. That low, metallic click felt *vulgar* in the quiet room.

"You're shaking," Will murmured, more curious than concerned. James didn't deny it. He was. Not with fear- no. With *want* . With obsession.

He pulled back for a second, breath ragged, eyes stormy and locked on Will's. "You always talk this much when someone's got their hands down your waistband?" he whispered, voice like smoke and sin.

Will's grin twitched. "Only when they're bad at it."

That did it. The belt hit the floor.

James all but growled, lifting Will and pushing him back toward the bed in one fluid, practiced movement. Clothes joined the trail of tension littering the floor- shirts, belts, the last shreds of self-control.

They were all teeth and fingertips now. Skin and bruises-in-the-making. Will gasped something sharp and indistinct, his fingers clawing at James' back like he couldn't bear not to *feel* all of him, *right now* .

James' voice dropped to a low, dangerous hum. "You think I watched you because I wanted to imagine this?" His mouth hovered just below Will's jaw, lips barely grazing. "I watched you because I *knew* this would happen. I was just waiting for you to catch up."

Will didn't answer. He moaned. And that sound? That goddamn sound? James devoured it. Will hit the mattress again from James' removing his last layer with a soft grunt, legs spreading instinctively as James leaned over him, one knee pressing between his thighs like it belonged there, like it *always* had. Their chests were heaving, sweat already starting to bloom at their hairlines, but neither was backing down. He wasn't even touching him, not really. Not

in the way he *could* . His gaze was a reverent thing, tracing the angles and curves like a blind man reading Braille with his eyes. The slope of Will's throat, the long line of his collarbone, the way his ribs lifted gently with each breath. There were fingerprints across his stomach where James had grabbed too hard. He liked that. He liked that *a lot* .

James' hands ghosted down Will's sides, deliberate and mocking, and Will arched against the teasing. His breath came sharp, but his smirk was worse. "All this build-up and you're still just… watching," he muttered, one eyebrow raised. "Is that all you're good at?"

James laughed, dark and low. "You really want to taunt the man with *months* of material stored in his head, darling?"

He leaned in, letting his lips drag along Will's jaw, his cheek, just shy of his mouth. "I could tell you the exact noise you make when you laugh at a text message. The way you bite the inside of your cheek when you're deep in thought. I've *memorised* you."

Will's mouth parted slightly, like he wanted to speak- or breathe- but couldn't do both. James pressed closer, a hand sliding up Will's bare thigh like he had every right. His voice dropped. "So when I touch you here…" He pressed his palm firmly against Will's inner thigh. "…and you twitch like that- don't act surprised."

Will inhaled sharply, his hands finally grabbing at James again, pulling him down until their foreheads touched, skin burning. "You're a freak," he murmured, half-laughed.

"You didn't do all this for normal," James bit back. His lips hovered millimetres away, never quite giving in, because this was about control- *his* control. "You came because I ruin you in your own head, and you needed to see what happens when you stop running."

Will groaned, head tipping back. "God, shut *up* -"

"Make me."

Will surged up, their mouths crashing together in a kiss that wasn't sweet or romantic, it was war. Teeth. Tongue. Hunger. James groaned into it, finally allowing himself the taste he'd been starving for. He bit Will's lip, not enough to break skin, just enough to mark.

Will shoved him, just a little, just enough to flip the dynamic for half a second. "Bet you've rehearsed all this in your creepy little head," he said between kisses, voice shaky with adrenaline and lust.

James grinned, feral. "Only difference is, in the daydreams, you never fought this hard."

Will's laugh was breathless, almost a whimper. "And in the dreams, do you still talk this much?"

"No," James whispered against his throat. "In the dreams, you beg."

He grinded his hips down, slow and cruel, and Will choked on a gasp. Their bodies were fever-warm and slick with want, no layers between them anymore. James kissed his way to Will's ear. "Say it," he murmured. "Say you want this."

Will didn't. He couldn't. But the way his hips lifted? The way his hands tangled in James' hair, dragging him back down? It said enough. And James smiled like a sinner granted sainthood. Will was gasping around the shape of a laugh, one hand fisting the sheets like he was holding himself together by threads. "Jesus," he whispered, voice rasping against his throat, "how are you like this?"

James smirked, cocking his head as if genuinely intrigued. "Like what?" he drawled, trailing one knuckle across Will's stomach. "Like someone who's been playing chess while you've been playing checkers?"

Will scoffed, the sound breaking on a groan when James dipped lower, lips brushing the skin just below his ribs. "No, like someone who's been *plotting my downfall* ."

James blinked up at him, lashes annoyingly pretty for a man that dangerous. "Oh sweetheart," he purred, "this isn't your downfall." His hands slid up Will's sides, steady, slow, reverent in the most *unholy* way. Will shifted, turning toward him, hair a haloed mess, lips bitten pink. James catalogued the way his muscles moved, how his thighs tensed and released in quiet rhythm, how his hands were too expressive to ever lie. His beauty wasn't loud. It was casual. Devastating. Careless, like he didn't even *know* the kind of weapon he was. That infuriated James- because he *did* . He knew, and he wielded it anyway.

Will tried to laugh but it faltered, his chest stuttered, too full of breath and something else. "You're ridiculous," he muttered.

"You're shaking," James murmured, pressing a kiss to the space just below Will's bellybutton. "Who's ridiculous now?"

Will's hands slid to his shoulders like he was bracing himself. "You think you've got me all figured out, don't you?"

James paused. "No," he said softly, with that lilt that was half affection, half arsenic. "But I know how to *open* you. That's more interesting."

There was a silence between them, thick and alive. Will's legs shifted under James', spreading further like his body had stopped checking with his brain. James grinned. "You know… we *could* stop. Call it a night. Go back to eating pasta and pretending you don't like the way I look at you."

Will's eyes sparked with something between defiance and surrender. "You're so full of yourself."

"Maybe," James murmured, leaning in again. "But I'm not wrong."

Will's lips parted- whether to argue or admit defeat, James would never know. Because instead of words, Will gave him that look. That *look* . The one that said, *take it, take me, fine- win, just shut up and do it already.* James sat back, just slightly. His thumb ghosted over Will's pulse point. Still fast.

"Your heart's racing," he whispered.

Will swallowed. “So’s yours.”

James let the silence stretch like gum between teeth.

Then he said, barely audible, “Good.”

James dipped his head low, like gravity itself had whispered to him, like his spine bent in reverence. Will’s breath hitched when James’ nose brushed the curve of his neck. His pulse was *thundering* there. Loud. Wild. James could *feel* it- like Will was already on the edge of something and hadn’t even realised it yet.

“You’re tense,” James whispered against his skin, his lips barely parting.

Will muttered something, a laugh maybe, but it dissolved too quickly. His fingers had found the back of James’ shoulders, not to pull him closer, not yet, but to *anchor* himself.

James didn’t let up. “Are you scared?” he asked, the words curling hot into Will’s skin, *taunting* . “Of me? Or yourself?”

His teeth grazed- not bit, not quite. A hint. A warning. The idea of pain without the *gift* of it. Will inhaled sharply, and James felt the shudder that moved through him like a prayer said wrong. Then he *pulled back* , just an inch, eyes sharp and dark and locked on Will’s.

And oh- *Will looked wrecked already.*

“That’s not fair,” Will said hoarsely.

“What isn’t?” James asked innocently, tilting his head, feigning confusion like a cat cornering a bird.

Will’s throat worked. “You know exactly what you’re doing.”

James smiled. It wasn’t sweet. “Oh, darling. If I was doing what I *wanted* , you'd already be begging.”

He reached between them then- not for skin, not for anything crude- but for Will’s *jaw* , tilting it, *holding* him there. Possessive. Gentle. *Violent* , in how softly he did it. Will’s eyes were wide. Not afraid. No. Just *bracing* .

James' thumb traced over Will’s cheekbone, like he was memorising the shape of him with skin instead of sight. Then he leaned in again, and this time, his lips brushed Will’s- not kissing, just hovering. Like he was inhaling the moment. Like he wanted to *savour* the desperation growing in Will’s chest.

“Say it,” James whispered.

Will’s lips trembled. “Say what?”

James didn’t blink. “That you want this.”

Will’s hands tightened around him. “James-”

But that wasn’t enough. James pressed closer, their mouths brushing now, shallow breaths colliding. “I need to *hear* it, Will. I want you to say it out loud.”

Will was breathing so heavily it hurt. And then- finally, a whisper: “I want it.”

James *smiled* . This time, with all his teeth. “That’s good, Lenney. Very good.”

James pressed Will back onto the bed like it was always meant to happen this way. As if gravity agreed. As if the bed, the night, the *universe* had been waiting for them to cave in. James didn’t rush. No. He teased. He *dragged* his fingertips over the newly exposed skin like it was artwork to be studied, to be tasted. Will arched, impatient, and James smirked against his neck.

"Look at you," James whispered, voice silk-dipped steel. "You’re already halfway gone."

Will’s response was half a whimper, half a curse, hands finding purchase in James’ hair. The air thickens around them, every breath a shared secret. James’ fingertips roam with growing confidence, sketching invisible maps over Will’s skin- a slow, teasing exploration, like a predator savoring the chase but pausing just before the kill. His touch is both gentle and demanding, coaxing reactions that ripple beneath his hands. They move like a charged storm- unpredictable, fierce, and impossible to resist. Every brush of skin against skin ignites a wildfire beneath their calm facades. The bed creaks softly under their weight, a soundtrack to their slow, deliberate collision. Their breaths mingle, hot and shallow, the quiet room suddenly charged with every unspoken promise and the weight of what’s waiting just beneath the surface.

James’ other hand finds the small of Will’s back, pulling him impossibly closer- the kind of close that makes your heart race and your mind scream *don’t stop now* . Will bites his lip, a low chuckle escaping, eyes flicking down to James’ mouth before locking back with that daring glance that says, *Try me.* James' touch becomes more intimate, more demanding. His hands explore every inch of Will's body, from the soft skin of his neck to the sensitive spot on his inner thigh. Will moans, his body arching into James' touch, his fingers digging into the sheets beneath them.

James' hand brushes over Will's dick, teasingly at first, barely a touch. Will's breath hitches, his muscles clenching, a wave of heat washing over him. James grins, the sight of Will so worked up driving him into a frenzy of need. Will's breath comes in ragged gasps as James' hand wraps around Will's aching hardness, his touch feather light at first, building to a slow, rhythmic stroke that makes Will's heart race and his mind go blank. Will moans, his body arching into the touch, craving more. He wraps his legs around James' waist, pulling him ever closer, wanting to feel every inch of him against his body. James presses their dicks together, their skin sliding against each other in his grasp. He leans in, capturing Will's mouth in a long, heated kiss, his hands roaming over his body, wanting to touch every part of him. The room is filled with the sounds of their heavy breathing and the soft moans that escape both their lips.

James' mind was a wildfire- not with panic, but with possession. Every noise Will made, every shiver, every shift beneath his hands was feeding something in him he couldn't name without flinching. He wasn't thinking of the cameras, or the feeds, or even Otto curled up somewhere outside this room. No. Right now, all he could think about was how *real* Will was under him, how warm and *willing* and utterly *here* . Not behind a screen. Not framed by glass. No, this wasn't observation- this was consumption. This was what it felt like to *win* . To be let in. To take what you'd studied for so long and finally *touch* it. And God, it was better than he ever imagined. Messier. Sweeter. Louder. It made the obsession feel justified. Holy, even.

James grabbed at one of Will's shoulders and gripped it, pushing more of his weight on top of him, his breathing was getting quicker but he was still trying his best to stay still. It was driving him insane how good he smelled and how his body felt, he could barely keep himself together. James pumped his hand faster- more aggressive, now. He could feel the pit in his stomach developing into something raw and feral- staring at Will like this, how his dick leaked at the tip and merged with James' own desperate trails of what was to come- it was almost *unreal* . Will's noises cascaded into James' ears like a forbidden symphony, each whimper, groan and grunt an evil development which was reserved for him and him only.

James hadn't expected to feel holy. Not now, not with Will's breath on his skin and his thoughts running dark. But this- *this* - was something else. Something sanctified. Every inch of Will beneath his hands felt like scripture, like something sacred carved out of the ordinary. He wanted to press his lips to every part of him like a prayer, like a confession. Like he could be forgiven for everything if he just kissed him gently enough.

James' hand gripped firm- tight, even- over both of their shafts. He was beginning to move faster, desperately chasing release but ever so gently swerving himself away from it. He could feel himself getting closer and didn't know how much longer he could hold off- but no. He *had* to hold off. The suspense and cruel dreams which plagued his sleep, which had caused him to wake up with damp underwear, was nothing compared to this. This was *real* .

"J-James-"

Will's words choked in his throat, his chest beautiful and slick with sweat. James loved the sight. Adored it. Recorded it in his brain so he could repeat it over and over. He buried his face into the crook of Will's neck, panting against his skin, desperate for contact and wanting to taste more of him. The room was filled with desperate gasps and violent groans. James wanted, no, *needed* to let go. Will thrusted to the motion of James' hand, causing more friction between them pressed together. James groaned, almost breathless with need. He lifted his head to look at Will's eyes, darkened with desire. He wanted to remember the exact moment that Will fell apart.

He wasn't used to softness- or- was it softness? Not like this. Not in the curves of a spine or the twitch of a smile in the dark. Will's body was warm with trust, and it undid him more than anything else ever had. The way he lay open and quiet, not out of submission, but comfort. James knew he was being given something rare, something unspoken and pure. It made his hands shake. It made his ribs feel too tight.

James watched Will intently, every breath and motion, studying the way his face twisted and the sounds that escaped his lips. He could tell that Will was close, and he wanted to watch as he got closer and closer to the edge. This was always one of James' favorite parts, to see the exact moment that someone lost control, to see the moment where they were lost in the feeling. There was a moment- halfway through the madness- where Will looked up at him and smiled. Nothing sly. No sass. Just something kind, and tired, and honest. James could've sobbed. He nearly did. Because in that single second, everything he'd ever wanted was *right there.* Not control. Not dominance. Not even closeness. Just *being known.* And being wanted anyway.

Will's eyes widened and James could tell that he felt himself getting closer and closer to the edge, his breathing becoming shallower and more erratic. Will's body tensed beneath him as he started to fall apart, his face contorting with pleasure. He didn't dare look at James, James knew that Will couldn't bear to have their eyes meet in that moment, it would be too much, too intimate. Instead he clenched at the sheets tightly, his knuckles going white as he held on for dear life. This was it. He dragged his thumb over the dip of Will's hip and thought, *this is art.* Not a painting, not a film. Something more alive than all of it. Something imperfect and impossible. Something *his.*

Will's body shuddered as he came, his head falling back onto the pillow. James let out a grunt of approval, "Fuck, Lenney-" James followed shortly after, riding out his own orgasm against his fist. He kept pumping until he was too sensitive to continue, and stared at the strings of white over his hand and both of their dicks, both of their stomachs too. He dragged his gaze to Will's face. He looked absolutely wrecked, his hair sticking to his forehead with sweat, his breath heavy and uneven. His eyes were hazy with pleasure, but he still wasn't able to make eye contact with James, his cheeks red.

The room was quiet now. Not silent, never truly, but quiet in the way a storm is after it's torn through a town and left everything breathless in its wake. James imagined that the candle on the table had long since melted down to a stub, the faintest glow flickering through the door crack. His fist moved it's position holding them and transferred to Will's hip. Will's bare shoulders were rising and falling with every slow, measured breath. James didn't know what to do with this stillness. The absence of battle. The quiet hum of skin on skin that wasn't a memory or a surveillance loop but *real* , and impossibly close. But it was the expression that wrecked him. The softness around Will's eyes. That tired, post-storm calm. The kind of calm that only came after you were known, after you'd let someone *see* . James didn't deserve that look. But he took it. Logged it. Stored it in the darkest corners of his chest for the nights he knew were coming- lonely, sharp-edged, sleepless.

He could smell Will's shampoo- citrus and something softer, despite it all. He hadn't noticed that before. Not from the window. Not from the tapes. His lips hovered near Will's ear. "Will," he whispered. Not to Will. To himself. Like he needed the confirmation said aloud before he lost grip.

Will didn't answer. Just shifted slightly, sleepily, as if it were the most natural thing in the world for them to be like this. James' hand twitched. He wanted to press his thumb into those lips. Map Will's body like geography he'd studied from a distance and was only now allowed to touch. But his brain, traitorous and bruised, kept muttering: *This won't last.*

And oh, wasn't that the bitter aftertaste of obsession- the knowledge that once you have what you want, you only fear losing it.

Will stirred from his daze, his voice cracked and sleep-warm. "…You're staring."

James didn't deny it. Yes- he absolutely was. He was drinking him in like a man too long without water. "You've got a scar," James murmured instead, fingers tracing it lightly against Will's hipbone, just enough for Will to twitch. "What's that from?"

"Bike accident," Will said. "When I was nine. Tried to impress someone." A beat. "Didn't work."

James gave a slow, wolfish smile. "Trying to impress people never ends well."

Will raised an eyebrow. "Says the man who's never stopped performing."

That stung a little more than James wanted to admit. He let the silence hang, letting it stretch between them until it felt like they were both balancing on its tightrope. "…Was I performing just now?" James asked, low. Almost a dare.

Will looked at him properly now. Chest to chest, legs tangled like ivy. He blinked. "No," he said finally. "That was probably the first time you weren't."

James didn't move. Couldn't. He felt pinned to the mattress- not by weight, but by the terrifying pressure of *being seen* .

Will smirked. "Bet you hate that, huh? Being readable."

James stared at him. Then leaned in close, letting his breath touch Will's lips without closing the space. "Careful," he whispered. "You're starting to sound like you *know* me."

Will, cocky little bastard, didn't flinch. "Maybe I do."

James swallowed. Hard. He was in *trouble* . Big, beautiful trouble, and he didn't want to escape.

II

The steam curled around the tiled doorway like fingers beckoning him in, fogging up the mirror and making the lights above the sink glow soft and hazy. Will had already stepped under the water- he was silhouette and heat now, a smear of gold and shadow behind the frosted glass. James stood just outside, barefoot on the cold tile, his fingertips flexing at his sides like they were waiting for permission.

Will hadn't said anything. Just walked in like it was normal- like it was casual. Like what had happened between them hadn't shattered something delicate inside James. James shifted his weight. His throat bobbed with the urge to speak but no words came. Was he… allowed in? *Is this a line?* He couldn't tell. The rules had blurred hours ago.

His whole life had been a tightrope walk of reading rooms, calculating risk. Every step with Will had been its own equation, but now the math was failing. James stared at the glass, his reflection warped, dripping. Would it be weird? Would Will laugh? Would he say, "Why are you making this a thing?"

Or worse- would he *look disappointed* that James hadn't just stepped in?

The water hissed.

James brought a hand to the back of his neck, eyes narrowing. What was the move? To wait for an invitation? To barge in like it meant nothing? This wasn't sex, wasn't tension. This was intimacy, the raw, mundane kind. The kind he didn't know how to do. It made his stomach twist tighter than anything that had come before.

He took a step forward. Just one. The tile was warm beneath his feet now. Through the blur of steam, he thought he saw Will turn, head cocked slightly.

Waiting.

James swallowed hard. Maybe the real question wasn't *am I allowed in?* But *do I want to be the kind of person who needs to ask?*

Will's silhouette shifted under the spray- a slight turn of the head, a subtle realignment of posture, but James saw it all. From where he stood, hovering like a glitch in the bathroom doorway, it felt seismic. "You just gonna stand there being dramatic," Will called out, voice raised slightly over the sound of water, "or are you waiting for me to beg?"

James didn't move.

Will exhaled something between a huff and a laugh, that amused, exasperated sound he made when he knew James was spiralling, even if he didn't know what about yet. "What is it?" he asked, softer now, a little more real. "Did I overstep?"

James blinked. That was the part that made his breath catch- *Will* asking *him* if *he* had overstepped. It felt backwards. Upside down. The world slanted and James, half-wrapped in

steam and indecision, suddenly hated how visible he was. Like Will could see straight through the frosted glass and into the warzone behind his eyes.

“No,” James managed eventually, but his voice was a brittle thing. “You didn’t.”

Will was quiet for a beat. Then: “So what’s the problem? It’s not like I haven’t seen you naked. Or are you shy now?”

James let out a hollow breath, half-scoff, half-laugh. “Not shy,” he muttered. “Just… recalibrating.”

“Recalibrating,” Will repeated, like he was chewing the word. “You sound like a robot.”

“I feel like one.”

A pause. The spray of water softened slightly, Will had adjusted it. “Well,” Will said, tone gentle now, “you don’t have to compute this one. It’s just a shower. It doesn’t have to be a *thing.* ”

James’ knuckles curled into the doorframe. But that was exactly it, everything was a *thing* with him. Every step, every word, every accidental brush of knees. His brain was a machine and Will kept smashing the buttons, throwing the inputs out of sync. He didn’t *know* how to exist without the calculations. Without the masks. Without-

Will pulled the door open slightly, letting a flood of warm mist escape, and poked his head out. Hair slicked back, cheeks flushed, gaze sharp. “I’m not asking you to bare your soul,” he said. “Just your arse.”

A beat. And for once… James let himself laugh. Quiet, breathy, but real. *Fine.* He stepped forward, already swiping his hair back with a sweaty palm. “You’re an idiot.”

Will grinned. “Takes one to shower with one.”

III

James sat on his sofa like a storm trapped in a bottle, all stillness on the outside, but every nerve inside rattling like glass in an earthquake. Otto was curled beside him, tongue dragging lazily across his flank, blissfully unaware that his owner was a molecule away from combusting.

Three days. Three fucking days.

Not a single message. Not a knock at the door. Not even a stupid like on one of his stories. James knew Will was alive- he'd *seen* him, after all. Watched the familiar silhouette come and go, backlit in the hallway light through the living room window. Tracked him leaving in running shoes, coming back with shopping, leaning against the wall on his phone in that casual, infuriating way he always did- like time was something he was in control of.

Will is different. James knows that- *reminds* himself of it like a mantra carved into bone. Will is normal. Stable. The sort of man who kisses someone, fucks someone, and then carries on with his life like nothing's ruptured beneath his skin. The kind of person who can tuck desire into a drawer, neat and clean, and go to work the next morning without shaking hands or obsessive thoughts. James isn't like that. He *never* has been. He can't. That night hadn't just been a high, it had sunk hooks into the softest parts of him. *Marked* him. And he doesn't *want* it to be a one-night thing. He doesn't want to be a glitch in Will's week. He wants it again. Not just the sexual touch- God, not just the touch. He wants *Will.* In the morning light. In silence. In arguments. In everything. He wants him like a bad habit. Like a religion. Like something sacred he's desperate to corrupt.

Three days. Seventy-two hours. One hundred and fifty-four times he'd opened their chat and stared at the last message, the one Will never replied to. Three days since Will had touched him like that, looked at him like *that* , and now- silence. James could still feel the heat of Will's hands on his skin, phantom touches that wouldn't die, wouldn't let him sleep. And yet Will had vanished. Like it meant *nothing.* Like James had dreamed the whole thing, invented the intimacy to feed whatever crawling hunger lived inside him. He'd watched Will leave his flat every morning, hair still damp from the shower, no limp in his walk, no hesitation in his movements. Untouched. Unbothered. James felt sick with it. Like he was the only one who remembered what they did. Like the thing that had wrecked *him* had barely grazed Will.

But what James had also seen, more than once now, was *Mikey.*

Knocking on Will's door with that smug, shit-eating smirk. Hands full of something- a beer, a takeaway, some stupid gift, like he thought he was entitled to waltz up there and *stay.*

And the worst part? Will *let him in.* Every time. Like it was nothing. Like Mikey's presence didn't *tilt the axis* of everything.

James's jaw clenched so tight it felt like his teeth might crack. He could go over there. Of course he could. He could take three strides, cross the street, press the buzzer and smile that awful, syrupy smile of his until Will opened the door and looked stunned to see him. Again.

He could say something clever. Say something that meant *get rid of him.* He could *end it* before it began.

But he wouldn't. Because that's what *Mikey* would do.

And James wasn't like Mikey.

Was he?

He scratched absentmindedly behind Otto's ears, watching the cat stretch into the touch. "You wouldn't let him in," he murmured, more to himself than to Otto. "You'd hiss."

James leaned back against the cushions, breath slow but tight. He *knew* Will and Mikey were just friends. Rationally, logically, in that little pocket of his brain that hadn't been torn to ribbons by jealousy and adrenaline, he *knew* it. Will had *told* him. Had laughed it off. Had *kissed* him.

But knowing didn't mean feeling. And all James could feel now was the static. That hollow buzz in his chest, the flicker of cameras behind his eyelids, the nauseating burn of being *shut out.* Again. He reached for his phone. Then stopped. Then reached again. No message. His thumb hovered. Still, nothing.

Fuck.

This wasn't about Mikey. It was about influence. And Will was *drifting.* James didn't move. He just sat there, eyes fixed blankly on the wall opposite, but not really *seeing* it. His brain was chewing itself raw.

It wasn't just that Mikey had been let in. It was that Will *trusted* him. Will laughed at his jokes. Will leaned in when Mikey whispered something in his ear. Will nodded, slowly, thoughtfully, when Mikey made some offhand comment about something James had said. It was subtle, maybe. But James had *seen* it. Had *tracked* it like prey.

And Mikey- *that prick* - knew exactly what he was doing. The way he positioned himself around Will, slightly in front, slightly louder, like a fucking guard dog. James could see it now, plain as day. Mikey didn't need to be explicit. He didn't need to say "James is weird" or "James gives me bad vibes." He could just *suggest.* And Will? Will would listen.

Because Will *trusted* him.

James knew Will didn't trust easily. That much was clear. He made people work for it. Made *James* work for it. And now? Now that trust was being *bent* - not snapped, not broken- but pulled gently into Mikey's orbit.

James dragged a hand down his face, then looked up, straight into Otto's unblinking eyes. The cat was perched on the armrest like a priest at confession, tail curling, gaze hard and ancient and knowing. And James, hunched over like some crumpled revenant, whispered, "What do I do, hmm?"

Otto blinked once.

“What do I do about *Mikey* ?” His voice twisted the name like it tasted rancid. “He’s… *there* . In every crevice. Always just behind Will, like a shadow that’s *too close* .”

Otto gave a low purr, nothing comforting about it. More like a warning.

James tilted his head, eyes darkening. “You see it, don’t you? The way Will laughs a little easier around him. The way he listens when he speaks. That’s influence. That’s *dangerous* .”

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, talking to Otto like the cat held divine wisdom, like this tiny, sleek creature could give him moral permission to do what he already wanted. “I could wait. Play nice. Let Mikey ruin it on his own. But that’s risky. Too much time. Too much *chance* .” His mouth twisted. “What if I plant something? Just a seed. Something subtle. A misunderstanding. A nudge.”

He stood suddenly, pacing now, gesturing with his hands like he was lecturing some invisible audience. “It doesn’t even have to be *true* . Just… possible. A lie that looks good in daylight. That’s all people need to believe something, right?”

Otto meowed softly. James stopped pacing and looked back at him.

“You’d be the only witness,” he whispered, stepping close again. “You wouldn’t tell. You never do.”

Otto tilted his head. James crouched beside him, lowering his voice like he was telling a bedtime story. “All I have to do is turn Will’s gaze. Just for a moment. Just… shift it away. From *Mikey* . Back to me.”

He let his eyes fall shut, hands clasped tight in front of him, knuckles pale.

“Tell me what to do,” he breathed, forehead pressing to Otto’s tiny, furry side. “Tell me how to erase him.” Otto didn’t speak. He didn’t have to. Because James already knew the answer.

And it wasn’t going to be kind.

He sat at the window instead- hood up, mug clutched between pale fingers, the bitter taste of overbrewed coffee long since forgotten on his tongue.

Will’s flat was dark. Except for the faint orange hum from his bedroom lamp, bleeding through slats of the blinds like a private little confession. James had already memorised the flicker of that light- he could tell when it was Will alone. But tonight?

Two shadows.

Two voices.

Two fucking glasses on the sill.

He clenched his jaw so hard it clicked. His grip on the mug tightened until Otto gave a warning meow and nudged his arm with a headbutt. James let out a low breath, like poison leaking from a cracked seal. “He’s still there.”

Mikey. Like a goddamn stain. Fine.

Fine. He couldn't even blink without seeing Mikey's fucking grin. That wide, shit-eating smirk. That casual way he leaned near Will, all elbows and secrets and inside jokes James couldn't decipher. That laugh Will gave around Mikey- different from the ones James curated so carefully. This one was natural. Easy. *Free.* Disgusting.

He didn't even register the words coming out of his mouth at first. "I tried the long game."

Pause. "I tried giving him room. Tried letting him see I was safe. But that little fucker keeps- *pulling* him."

Otto meowed. James ignored him. "No more. No more of Will's stories or screenshots or... fucking Instagram bullshit. No more cute little clues."

He stood up. Paced. "He's the problem. The *last* problem."

Mikey's laugh in his ears. The visual: Will standing at the door, swaying just slightly, letting Mikey inside with a smile James hadn't seen in days. Otto jumped down as James rounded the room, collecting thoughts like weapons.

"Accidents happen all the time," he said aloud.

There. The words were out. They didn't sound foreign. They didn't sound wrong. They sounded... *inevitable* .

People slipped. Got the wrong pills. Went missing. Got lost in the night. The city had teeth and if you weren't careful, it *bit* . And wouldn't it be a shame- oh, *such* a shame- if Mikey just... disappeared into one of those gaping mouths?

James' gaze slid to his phone. The CCTV thumbnail blinked back at him- Will's hallway. Empty now. But earlier? Mikey had stood there, shoulders cocky, voice raised just enough to be heard even through the grainy mic. Confident. Sure of his place in Will's life.

James licked his bottom lip thoughtfully. Confidence like that always made such a delicious sound when it cracked.

The thing about James Marriott, is that you can't lock a door that he already has the key to.

IIII

Will stirred his oat milk flat white with the kind of lazy grace that made James want to snap the spoon in half. The café was their usual. Their table, their windowsill, their two seats tucked into the crook of the world where the city passed by unnoticed. James sat across from him, fingers curled around his Americano, watching him like he was studying an ancient language- every gesture, every blink, every hesitation.

“So,” James said, voice casual. Calculated. Like a spider spinning silk. “I was thinking…”

Will looked up. Eyebrows raised, suspicious already. “Dangerous.”

James smirked. “We should go out sometime. You, me…” He paused, letting it hang just long enough for Will’s brow to tighten. “Mikey.”

Will blinked. His spoon clinked softly against the cup as it dropped.

“Mikey,” he repeated flatly, like James had just suggested they resurrect a corpse for dinner.

James tilted his head, smiling like this wasn’t psychological warfare. “Yeah. I’ve been… hard on him. You care about him. Maybe I haven’t made enough effort.”

Will’s eyes narrowed. “You? Want to spend time with Mikey? The guy you once called ‘a sunburn in human form’?”

“I was being poetic,” James said, sipping his coffee. “Maybe he’s not so bad. I’m willing to be proven wrong.”

Will stared, suspicion painting every inch of his face. His silence was louder than any protest.

“I’m just saying,” James continued, all lightness and lace, “a night out. A few drinks. Could be fun.”

Will leaned back in his chair, folding his arms. “You don’t do fun. You do… controlled chaos.”

James’s grin sharpened, like he’d been paid a compliment. “Then let’s call it a controlled night out.”

A beat of silence. The world buzzed around them- cutlery clinking, coffee hissing, the dull murmur of strangers. James didn’t break eye contact. He watched Will chew on the thought, eyes darting across James’ face as if trying to read a language he didn’t quite know.

“Alright,” Will said finally. Slowly. Like a man agreeing to pet a cobra. “But if this is weird- if you start acting like a serial killer- I’m leaving.”

James chuckled. “Noted. No murder on the first drink.”

He raised his cup in mock salute. Will didn't toast back. Just stared, brows still pinched, like he knew deep down- *something about this wasn't right.*

Not right at all.

James swirled the remaining dark pool of his coffee, eyes fixed on it like it might give him an answer. Will was half-scrolling through something on his phone, distracted, but present enough for James to feel the tension flickering between them like a gas stove waiting to catch. "So," James said, tone as breezy as a guillotine. "If we're all going out… you reckon Mikey should know I wanked us off?"

Will *choked* .

His thumb froze mid-scroll, eyes snapping up to James with a mixture of alarm and a laugh that burst out before he could stop it. "You can't just say that in the middle of a café," Will hissed, snorting, pressing the heel of his palm to his forehead like James was some kind of unfixable disease. "You're a menace."

James smiled, teeth sharp and white. "He hates me, Will. Wouldn't it be a shame if that hatred had… context?"

"You're insane."

"And yet here you are."

Will laughed again, this time louder. "Yeah, here I am. At your mercy. Again. I'm starting to think you've got me under some kind of weird hypnosis."

James leaned back, satisfied. "Wouldn't you rather it was honesty? Brutal, unfiltered, post-coital honesty."

Will stared at him, mouth twitching. "You're a nightmare."

James raised a brow. "Your nightmare, though?"

Will gave him that look- the one that was half fondness, half exasperation, and *entirely* too soft. "…yeah," he muttered. "Apparently."

Will leaned forward, elbows on the table, watching him like he was trying to solve a riddle written in blood. "No, seriously. What's with you and Mikey? Why now? You've *never* liked him. Like- openly. And now you want to go for drinks? The three of us? For what? Bonding?"

James tilted his head. "Wouldn't it be nice?"

Will squinted. "No, it wouldn't. It'd be *weird* . *You're* being weird. Since when are you this generous?"

James shrugged, slow. "Maybe I'm turning over a new leaf."

Will didn't laugh. He just looked at him, hard. "You're not. That's the thing. So, I'll ask again- *why* do you want to see Mikey?"

The table fell quiet. James met Will's eyes for a long second, lips parted just slightly like he might say something real. Something raw. He didn't. Instead, he leaned back, smiled like a cat, and said, "Would you rather it just be us, then?"

Will blinked. "I mean… yeah. Obviously. What even is this sudden group hang energy?"

James nodded slowly, tapping the side of his mug. "Just making sure you want me all to yourself, that's all."

Will groaned, rolling his eyes. "Oh my God, *shut up* . You're impossible."

James grinned, but didn't deny it. He never did. Will's gaze dropped to his coffee, swirling it absently and watching the spirals of oat milk and bitterness.

James didn't press him. Just sat there in that maddening silence of his, letting the tension pool. Letting Will *think* . That was the trick. You never tell someone what you want. You just hold up the mirror and wait for them to say it for you.

Will exhaled, soft. "I mean… if you *do* actually want to see Mikey, maybe it wouldn't be *too* bad. Like- whatever. The three of us. I guess it could be chill."

He didn't sound convinced. James hummed, almost pitying. "Mmm. I don't know. I wouldn't want to make Mikey uncomfortable."

Will snorted. "Since when do you care about Mikey's feelings?"

"Exactly."

Will looked up sharply at that. James gave him the *look* - the smug one, the one that said, *you're playing my game and you don't even know it.*

Will blinked, faltered, tried to keep the upper hand. "He might say no. He's still weird about you."

James sipped his coffee, slow. "Then you'll just have to convince him."

Will gave a tight laugh, rubbing his jaw. "This is so dumb. You're so—ugh. Fine. I'll ask him. But if he says no, we're doing something *just us* ."

James' smile curled like smoke. "Deal."

James stirred the dregs of his coffee with the tip of his spoon, not because it needed stirring- he hadn't added sugar, didn't even like it sweet- but because it gave his hand something to do. *Effortless,* that's what Will was. Effortless in his charm, his indifference, his ability to carry on as if James hadn't been wrecked days ago in the bed of the man now sipping an oat latte like nothing had happened.

"Right," James said finally, voice forced casual, like it wasn't premeditated to death. He didn't look up. "Were you just... busy? The past few days?"

Will turned his head away from the window and back to James. "Huh?"

"You didn't text," James said, almost a laugh but it came out wrong. Clipped. "Just went quiet. Thought maybe I'd broken your WiFi or something."

There was a pause. Too long. Long enough for James to imagine all the wrong things again. Will leaned back in his chair, chewing the inside of his cheek, and James wanted to reach across the table and shake him- *say something, react, explain.* "Yeah," Will said at last, dragging a hand through his hair. "Sorry. I was… processing, I guess."

James nodded slowly, fixing his gaze on the swirl of foam left in Will's glass. "Right. Of course. Processing."

He didn't say, *was it that bad?* Didn't say, *was I too much? Did I ruin it?* He just smiled, brittle and crooked, and kept stirring his coffee like maybe he could dissolve the humiliation if he just moved fast enough.

Will shifted in his seat like the chair had suddenly become uncomfortable. James didn't look up- he couldn't. He was already embarrassed enough, sitting there like the world's most pathetic afterthought.

Will exhaled. "Look, James. It wasn't you, alright? It's not like I—ghosted on purpose. I just… didn't know what to say."

James let out a soft, mirthless laugh. It caught in his throat like it had barbs. "You didn't know what to say after throwing yourself at me?"

It was venom said sweetly. James didn't even mean it to hurt, but part of him hoped it did. That it would make Will wince, or squirm, or *feel* something the way James had felt for the past three days: hollow, obsessive, raw.

Will rolled his eyes, annoyed now. "I didn't throw myself at you."

James looked up then, meeting his gaze head-on with that lazy, dangerous smile he wore when everything underneath was screaming. "Oh, babe, you quite literally slid underneath me."

Will cracked a smile despite himself, but the air between them was still taut. A flicker of fondness passed through his features, brief and boyish. "Yeah, okay. But you were- *you* . All mysterious and dark and annoying. And hot, unfortunately."

James smirked, but it didn't quite land. "Unfortunate indeed."

And then there was a silence. Not hostile, not exactly- just *heavy* . Like there was too much unsaid between them and it had weight now, hanging in the air above their little table, beside their empty plates and untouched pastries. Will's knee bounced under the table, jittery. He

chewed his bottom lip like he was holding something back, “It meant something. I’m not saying it didn’t. I just don’t- *do* this stuff often, alright? Not like that.”

James’ breath caught. He blinked slowly, keeping his face still, composed, while his chest stung like it had been pinched. He picked at the sleeve of his cardigan, stretching the cuff, his voice a shade too flat. “And I do?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to.”

Will sighed, loudly, dramatically. Like he was trying to blow away the tension between them, both palms flat on the table. “James. Jesus. I didn’t text because I was scared. Okay? I freaked out a little. But I didn’t run.”

James gave a slow blink, processing that. It was an apology, sort of. Wrapped in Will’s usual sarcasm and guilt-avoidance. But it was there. Still, the question itched at the back of his throat, raw and real: *Was it just sex to you? Was it nothing?* He didn’t ask it. Instead, he spoke, voice deceptively light. “So are we talking again now, or am I on some sort of mysterious probation?”

Will scoffed. “I brought you coffee, didn’t I?”

“True,” James said, eyeing the cup. “I suppose caffeine counts as emotional intimacy now.”

Will snorted. “Only if it’s oat milk. Which it is, by the way. Don’t say I never think about you.”

And there it was- that flicker of warmth beneath Will’s playful grin. The thing that made James spiral and soften all at once. James’s throat tightened. That- right there. That was the problem. That flippant affection, tossed in like sugar to coat the ache. It ruined him every time. Still. The wound was barely bandaged. He didn’t know if what they had was healing, or if it was just *familiar* - a kind of hurt that at least made sense.

James tilted his cup slightly, watching the ripples of coffee lap at the ceramic edge like it was more interesting than what he was about to say. His voice came out too casual, too measured to be innocent. “So…” he began, letting the word sit in the space between them like a trap being baited. “Have you told Mikey? Y’know. About that night.”

Will looked up mid-sip, nearly choking on his drink. He blinked, caught somewhere between amusement and disbelief. “Oh my god. *Mikey again?* ”

James shrugged, one shoulder rising just a fraction. “I’m just saying. You two are joined at the hip. Wouldn’t surprise me if you ran him a detailed PowerPoint.”

Will rolled his eyes and gave him a look- the kind that said *you're ridiculous, but I'm not walking away* . “Do you think I give him a report every time I get laid?”

James’ smirk twitched. “So you *are* admitting it was getting laid.”

Will narrowed his eyes, lips quirking. “That’s not the point.”

James leaned back slightly in his chair, studying him like a chessboard. “No, the point is that every time I bring him up, you deflect like I’ve asked you to marry me.”

Will snorted. “Because you’re obsessed, *clearly.* The way his name lives rent-free in your mouth? I’m about to start getting jealous of *him.* ”

James barked a laugh at that- sharp, surprised. “God, you’re unbearable.”

“And yet,” Will replied smugly, sipping from his cup, “here you are. Across from me. Pouting like I’ve betrayed you by having friends.”

“I don’t pout.”

“You pout *so much* ,” Will grinned.

James narrowed his eyes. “So you *didn’t* tell him?”

Will let the question hang for a second, then shook his head with a chuckle. “No. I didn’t. Not yet. Not really his business.”

That should’ve calmed something inside James. It didn’t. Not quite. Will added, almost like an afterthought, “I think I liked it better when you were worried Mikey was in love with me.”

James tilted his head. “Who says I’m not still worried?”

Will grinned, wide and wicked. “Then I guess you better keep me entertained, huh?”

And just like that, the conversation shifted again- sharp tension wrapped in flirting, wearing its teeth behind a smile. It was endless, the push and pull of two men who didn’t quite know where they stood.

Will had said something- something light, probably cheeky- but James hadn’t caught it. He was too busy looking at him.

Really looking at him.

The slant of Will’s jaw, the way his lips curved into effortless mischief. But it was the eyes that stopped him cold. Those goddamn eyes. Icy blue, yes, but not cold. Never cold. They carried something heavier than that. Something unbearable. Understanding.

And James hated it.

Those eyes had clocked the way he faltered in the kitchen, that day after the argument. The way James’ voice had cracked when Will had asked about his childhood. He hadn’t said much- barely even enough to call it a true confession, only brief anecdotes- but Will had *listened* . He'd absorbed the pauses, the silences, the tremble of James’ hand as he poured coffee. He’d noticed the unsaid things.

James swallowed, mouth suddenly dry. He thought of that night- the heat of it, the sweat and teeth and laughter that had spilled between them. And how, right before everything tipped over the edge, Will had softened his tone. Gentle. Like James was something breakable. Like he *knew* .

And maybe he did.

Maybe Will saw all the jagged lines James kept buried under smirks and sarcasm. Maybe he was starting to map them out, trace the bruises with those sharp, caring eyes. And maybe- *maybe* - James wanted to let him.

His heart thudded too loud in his ears at the thought. What a ridiculous thing, to be known. To be *seen* . But no. No. Not yet. He cleared his throat, straightened his spine. Willed the vulnerability away. Folded it back into its neat little coffin and buried it beneath that well-worn smirk.

Too soon.

Because James *knew* they'd reached that stage- the one where people started swapping childhood stories like old songs. 'When I was ten, I broke my arm climbing a tree.' 'My mum used to sneak sweets into my packed lunch.' It was normal. Expected. And they *had* known each other for a while now. Long enough for Will's presence to feel like something lived-in. Long enough that James could probably recount every cadence of Will's laugh and the rhythm of his breathing when he relaxed.

So why couldn't he tell him?

Why, when Will opened the door so wide with his stories, did James freeze at the threshold?

He poked at the corner of his napkin with one finger, folding it again and again until it was a useless mess of creases. The answer buzzed low in his stomach, a sickness that never left him. Because his stories weren't soft. They weren't funny or charming or sweet. They didn't involve scraped knees or childhood pets. His stories came with sharp edges and shouting and silence so loud it rang in his ears for hours.

He wasn't scared of sharing. He was scared of *corrupting* .

He was scared Will would look at him differently- like he was broken, like something had *happened* to him. Because something had. And while James lived with it, tucked it into his bones and wore it like a second skin, he couldn't bear the thought of it reflected in *Will's* eyes. So he didn't speak. He smiled instead. Played coy. Spoke in riddles and irony and made sure his mask was lacquered on *tight* . Because if Will knew- if he *really* knew- he might stop looking at James the way he did now.

And that? That was *unbearable* .

Will's phone buzzed. He didn't even open it- just glanced at the screen, face impassive, and tucked it back into his pocket. But James caught the name. *Mikey.* Of course it was Mikey.

And just like that, the clarity returned.

It was *always* Mikey. Always that smug, ginger shadow lingering at the edge of every moment. The texts Will answered too quickly. The stories Will told with fondness in his voice. The comfort James could *never* quite dismantle. Mikey was the buffer. The safety net. The *one* person in Will's life who could still pull him back, no matter how far he wandered into James' orbit. And that was the problem, wasn't it?

James couldn't share his truth. Not with someone like *that* hovering in Will's periphery. Judging. Poisoning. Waiting for him to fuck up so he could drag Will right back into the safety of *normal* . Of *predictable* .

Maybe, James thought, just maybe—if the noise stopped. If that phone stopped lighting up with *Mikey's* name. If the world got quieter, just for a moment… maybe then James could tell the truth. Maybe then he could *breathe* .

He looked out the café window, the glass fogged at the corners.

Some silences weren't accidental. Some were *made* - forged with careful hands and sharpened edges.

And James had always been very good with a scalpel.

Chapter End Notes

You may have noticed I used a lot of question marks during the smut scene in part 'I'. I did this to destabilise the tone slightly- I wanted to undercut the usual confidence and dominance expressed in normal erotic writing and make it more 'James'. There's hesitancy, there's devotion, there's internal conflict- and I believed this would sort of force the reader into a sort of moral ambiguity. Is James scared? Excited? Confused? It's a stylistic choice which foregrounds what it is to be not just human, but to be James.

I wanted the shower scene to have a pretty prominent pause to elaborate the glossy surface of desire which is cracked open after they share a bed. It's messy and real and raw, and somehow the closeness and naked intimacy is entirely different without that sexual desire fuelling it. It's more intimate and soul-connecting, emotional territory with a brief moment of stillness where something's at stake. It's not just about joining Will, it's about confronting what all of it means.

It's apparent and increasingly obvious that James hating on how Will trusts Mikey isn't just jealousy- especially not after he shared intimacy with Will. It's control slipping through his fingers, and rage at how undeservedly safe Will feels with someone who isn't him. It feels like betrayal and exposes a cold truth: James is not the sole keeper of Will's attention. And to be someone like James, that's painful. It's not just a case of not

liking someone, it's proof that James has not been able to completely infiltrate him, even after they shared a bed. It's a sort of desperation along the lines of 'Why isn't that trust mine?' and 'Why does Mikey get it for free when I have to orchestrate manipulation just to get close?'.

James insisting that Will and Mikey go out together is such a manipulative power play it’s genuinely performance art, and I wanted to make it clear that he’s not suggesting it to be friendly, but instead he’s curating the moment. It’s about putting himself in the scene, forcing himself into their dynamic so he can dissect it in real time. He wants to watch their bond, measure every glance, every laugh, and twist it into proof of betrayal. If Will flinches, dodges, seems nervous, James clocks it. If he doesn’t? That’s infuriating. Either way, James wins because he’s making them perform, while he plays puppetmaster. So I'm excited to write this and see what you all think, because I think it'll be super fun to write.

All of the comments make me so happy and I'd love to see what you all think about this chapter. Much love, and see you soon.

It Always Slips

Chapter Summary

I: 'More!' - Nxida
II: 'Boy Clothes' - Nxdia
III: 'back to friends' - sombr
IIII: 'Something in the Orange' - Zach Bryan

Chapter Notes

Greetings! Here I am, back with another chapter! Did you miss me?

Your comments make me so so motivated, please keep it up! Writing this is sometimes emotionally draining but it's nice to know I have a very supportive group rooting for me. Let's not yap too much... Let's get into it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I

The taxi smelt like stale cider and pine-scented lies. James sat stiffly, his thigh millimetres from Will's on the cracked faux-leather backseat, hands resting on either side of his lap like loaded guns- one twitch away from contact. The middle seat between them buzzed with unsaid things. Their pinkies flirted with each other's shadows.

Will glanced at him, head tilted just a little. That damn smirk.

"Don't be weird about this," he said. Casual. Careless. Like James hadn't been rewinding every social interaction Mikey had ever had with Will and mentally pinning it to a red-thread wall of potential sabotage.

James turned his head slowly. "I'm never weird."

Will scoffed, looking out the window. "You're *always* weird."

It stung, but only in the delicious, familiar way that Will's honesty always did. It was the kind of sting James craved. The driver took a sharp corner. James braced a hand against the seat, and Will's hand brushed his for a second- bare skin, no gloves, no intention- and then pulled back like nothing had happened. But something had. James felt it. He felt *everything* .

He studied Will's face in the blur of streetlights. That natural flush in his cheeks. The relaxed slump of his posture. The lightness in his tone when he spoke about Mikey, like it didn't matter. Like James wouldn't gladly walk into traffic if it meant Will would lean on *him* like that instead.

"You didn't tell Mikey I was coming, did you?" James said, eyes narrowing.

Will grinned. "What gave it away?"

James sighed. "You're going to get me punched."

"Nah." Will shrugged. "You're too slippery for that."

James smiled- tight-lipped, sharp. That wasn't untrue.

The city throbbed past the windows, neon and drunken laughter spilling out from pub doors. James stared at the blur, heart ticking too loud. A part of him wanted to reach over and thread their fingers together. Just to *know* that Will would let him. Just to see if the night could belong to *them* instead of Mikey.

The bar was loud, warm with the smell of beer and damp jackets, all dim light and glassy laughter. James stepped in half a second behind Will, the door swinging shut behind them, cutting off the cold air and slicing clean into the heat of bodies and bass.

Mikey was already there- of course he was. Sat at a booth with a pint in hand, one ankle hooked over his knee, the picture of casual charm. He clocked Will immediately, grin spreading across his face like a welcome mat.

"Oi oi, look who it is," Mikey called, raising his glass. "Finally decided to grace me with your presence- "

And then he saw James.

It was subtle- expert-level, almost- the way Mikey's smile dropped not all at once, but like a slow descent down a lift shaft. One tiny twitch at the corner of his mouth. One half-beat pause before setting his glass down. His eyes narrowed for a breath too long. Will noticed. James *savored* it.

"James is here too," Will said breezily, not quite looking either of them in the eye, like if he didn't acknowledge the weirdness, it didn't exist.

Mikey didn't respond straight away. Just let his gaze flick from Will to James, assessing, recalibrating. Then he leaned back, real slow. "Brilliant," Mikey said, with the warmth of a hotel lamp. "Didn't realise this was a bring-your-own-stalker night."

James smiled. Oh, *that's* how we're playing it.

He stepped forward with all the calm in the world, shoulder brushing Will's just so. His voice was syrup-sweet. "Aw, Mikey. Don't be like that. I'm just here for the drinks."

And maybe the funeral.

Mikey raised his brows, the corner of his mouth twitching in something that thought it was a smirk. "Right."

They stood there a second longer than necessary, two dogs circling the same patch of territory. The booth in front of Mikey was empty. James didn't move to sit. Will, bless his oblivious peacekeeping heart, clapped his hands like a nervous host. "Alright, calm down," he muttered, trying to wave the tension away. "Let's get a round in, yeah?"

James leaned in slightly, enough so only Mikey would hear. "Looking forward to the night," he said, deadpan. "Hope it's one to remember."

He clapped Mikey on the shoulder. Firm. Just a second too long. And oh, it would be. Some nights ended with cheers and blurry selfies. Others… with silence. And the memory of someone walking out alone.

The pints arrived first. Clunky, sweating glasses thudded down onto the varnished wood like a warning. Mikey already had his hand wrapped around his second, lifting it in a lazy sort of toast. "To surviving another week," he said, tone innocent enough to be a lie. "Barely."

Will clinked his glass against Mikey's. "Cheers to that."

James raised his own- smaller, clear. Sparkling water, slice of lime, not a bubble out of place. Mikey clocked it immediately. Of *course* he did. "Oh, you're not drinking?" he asked, eyebrows lifting like it was casual, but nothing Mikey ever said was casual. "Didn't realise we were out for tea and biscuits."

James smiled thinly, resting his glass on the table with two fingers like he was positioning a chess piece. "Didn't realise we were all required to be blackout to endure your company."

Will made a noise- something between a laugh and a warning cough. He looked between the two of them like a child caught between divorcing parents at a restaurant.

"I think it's cool," Will said quickly, too brightly. "Being sober is… refreshing."

Mikey raised a brow, clearly enjoying the show. "Will, you never say that."

James leaned forward slightly, folding his arms on the table. "Some of us like to be *aware* of our choices."

Mikey's grin didn't reach his eyes. "Mmm. Conscious, calculating. Very *you* , mate."

Will knocked back half his drink in a single gulp, eyes fluttering shut like he was praying. "Alright," he said, breathless. "We *just* got here. Let's not murder each other until at least pint three."

James looked at Will then. Really looked at him, that soft flush in his cheeks already, the tension in his shoulders. There was something almost bashful about it. Like Will *knew* exactly what he'd done, not warning Mikey about this. Like he *knew* James wouldn't settle.

They spoke about something ordinary- music, maybe. Some band Mikey liked. Will was laughing at a story, one James had heard before, and yet still, he offered that polite half-smile, the kind you wear to funerals or family dinners when there's no way out.

Mikey's laugh rang out, sharp and brash, ricocheting off the walls of the bar like a warning bell. It sounded like a funeral chime.

James sipped his drink slowly, as if water might dilute the heat simmering in his bloodstream. He didn't interrupt. Not yet. Instead, he watched. Observed. The way Will smiled at Mikey, how easily the corners of his eyes crinkled. How relaxed his shoulders seemed when James wasn't talking. How he leaned forward to Mikey just slightly, as if proximity to him offered some kind of ease that James- for all his charm, his calculation, his obsession- could never manufacture. Not naturally.

James stared at the shadows cast by the overhead lights. One of them curled around Mikey's shoulders like a noose. Another stretched long behind Will, like a leash.

His fingers curled around his glass. Still smiling. There were a thousand ways to end the moment. To slice the evening down its spine and peel it open until Will looked at him the way he *used* to. The way he did when things were softer. When it was just them. He could

spill his drink. Start an argument. Or maybe reach over and say something, something cruel. Something *true* .

Instead, he stayed still. Will looked over then, eyes brushing against his with a warmth that stung. “You okay?”

James blinked once. “Of course.”

His voice was sweet. Dipped in honey. But the thoughts inside him were iron and ash. He glanced back at Mikey, laughing again, always laughing, always performing like this was some competition James never agreed to enter. He could barely hear the words anymore. All he could hear was *intent* .

And in that moment, all James could think about, all he could *see* , was how easy it would be to ruin it. To shatter this table into splinters and end the night with silence instead of laughter. But instead he just sipped his water, and waited.

Mikey leaned back in his chair, stretching an arm over the backrest like he owned the bar, like the whole night belonged to *him* . His pint glass was half-empty, condensation dripping in lazy trails down the side. He grinned- and James could already tell it was a setup.

“So,” Mikey started, drawing out the word like he’d been waiting for this- like this wasn’t casual chatter but a trap lined in velvet, “how’d you two meet again?”

James met his eyes. Calm. Cold. Careful.

Will didn’t notice the shift. He smiled as he replied, “The café. The vegan thingy, remember?”

“Oh, right, *right* .” Mikey nodded slowly, that grin tightening at the edges. “The whole oat milk saviour routine. Classic.”

James just raised an eyebrow, letting the insult glide over him like mist. He sipped his drink.

“But it’s wild, yeah?” Mikey continued. “One minute, you’re chatting up strangers in cafés, and the next you’re- what? Having romantic pasta dinners by candlelight?” He gave a little shrug, mock-innocent. “Some people move fast.”

Will laughed, a bit awkwardly, eyes darting between them. James’ tongue pressed against his molars. Mikey wasn’t done. He leaned forward slightly now, dropping his voice. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, mate-" he gestured at James vaguely, like he was a concept, not a person- "you seem… intense. Not a *bad* thing. Just. Will’s always been a bit of a soft touch, you know?”

James tilted his head, smile fixed, jaw locked. “Oh, I know,” he said, voice smooth as silk, menace tucked beneath it like a knife under a napkin. “He’s just so… trusting.”

There was a second, a single second, where Mikey’s eyes narrowed. Where he *heard* what James meant, but didn’t know what to do with it. Will, oblivious to the current pulling

underneath the table, offered a strained chuckle. “Okay, can we stop dissecting me like I’m not here?”

“Sorry,” James said, gaze never leaving Mikey. “Didn’t mean to speak *about* you. That’s rude.”

“Oh, you’re good at rude,” Mikey said quickly, tone still light, but eyes gleaming. “I bet you’re real good at pretending it’s charm.”

And *there* it was. A little crack. A hairline fracture. James leaned back, letting the silence stretch. Letting Mikey think he’d won something. He’d just handed James the blade.

Mikey’s grin twisted, eyes sharp like a butcher’s knife. “It’s *weird* , isn’t it? How you two met. You were strangers, and now you’re living, what, opposite flats? What are the odds, right?” He laughed, but it was hollow, more like a sneer wrapped in amusement.

James’ gaze flicked to Will, then back to Mikey, but his expression stayed calm- too calm, like a cat eyeing a mouse trap.

“Like you just *happened* to walk into the same café nearly every damn day. Just *happened* to know all these details about Will’s life. Funny how that works,” Mikey continued, voice dropping, every word sharp enough to cut glass. “Almost like you’ve been watching him.”

Will shifted uncomfortably, brows knitting. He glanced between the two, sensing the undercurrent. James’ fingers twitched on the glass, a quiet storm brewing behind his steady eyes. The kind of storm that could drown worlds. Mikey leaned forward slightly, voice lower, a venomous whisper: “Not that I’m saying you’re a stalker or anything... but, well, you know. People notice.”

James’ smile was ice. “Is that your way of saying you’re jealous, Mikey? Or just scared?”

Mikey’s smirk faltered for a flicker of a second, but he masked it quickly. “Just calling it like I see it. Because when I see someone like you, I *watch* closely. And that’s not always a good thing.”

The bar’s noise swelled around them, but between James and Mikey, the air was thick- thick enough to suffocate. Will’s voice broke the silence, “Can we not do this here?” but the damage had already been done.

Will cleared his throat, shifting uncomfortably in the booth, eyes flicking between the two like he’s trying to find the exit with his gaze alone. “I’m just gonna- uh- grab some more drinks. Anyone want anything?” His voice was quick, tense, like he was rehearsing a getaway plan.

Mikey’s grin stretched wider, venom pouring out with sickening delight. “No thanks. But let me just say, James isn’t as innocent as he wants you to think. Watching you- *really* watching you- like you’re some prize behind a window.” His eyes locked onto James, every word laced with poison. “I mean, you told me yourself, didn’t you, Will? That your flats are opposite each other? Convenient setup for a… voyeur, right?”

James' jaw tightened imperceptibly, fingers curling around the glass as Mikey leaned in, voice dropping to a dangerous whisper that only James could hear. "Don't play dumb. We both know what you're doing. This isn't some cute obsession; it's a goddamn invasion."

The booth seemed to shrink around James, but his smile stayed frozen, razor sharp and deadly calm. Will returned moments later with two beers, eyes darting nervously between them, sensing the storm but not quite ready to step into the hurricane. Mikey laughed, sharp and cold, eyes gleaming like a predator's. "Relax, Will. Just calling out the bullshit. Because I care."

James' mind was racing, every silent breath a countdown. Mikey just put the spotlight on a fire James hadn't fully lit yet. But tonight? Tonight, it was about to burn everything down.

James caught it- a fleeting shimmer in Will's eyes, the kind that wasn't just confusion or awkwardness but something sharper, something *seeing* . Like the veil was lifting, and the damn truth was peeking through. A little hesitation, a microsecond of doubt that screamed, *Maybe he's not just a harmless admirer.*

That split-second was all James needed. His smile sharpened, colder now, a predator flicking its claws just enough to remind the prey who's in charge. He leaned forward, voice low and dangerously smooth. "Don't start thinking too much, Will. You like this- me. Not the shadows. So stop letting them creep in."

His eyes locked onto Will's, heavy with warning, a silent demand that the moment of weakness vanish like smoke. "Focus on us. Forget the rest."

And just like that, the shimmer faded, replaced by the familiar, comfortable blur of denial. Because James always knows when to tighten the leash before it slips. Mikey swayed back from the table, flashing that crooked grin that James loathed almost as much as the man himself. "I need to hit the loo," he muttered, voice low but loud enough for the table to catch it. With that, he pushed through the dense crowd, weaving with practiced ease like he owned the place- even though everyone here probably hated him just as much as James did.

James's eyes tracked Mikey's retreating figure, his posture deceptively casual as he brought his glass- soda, of course- to his lips. But inside? Inside, he was humming. A low, vibrating tension that felt like a string being slowly pulled tighter and tighter. The crowd seemed to part around Mikey like it *wanted* him gone. James watched the way his shoulders bobbed, that irritating walk with too much confidence and not enough consequence. The lights flickered briefly, catching the red in Mikey's hair, making him look like a walking target. And James- he didn't blink.

Will shifted beside him, just slightly, and James turned his head, catching that sweet profile. Will leaned a little closer, probably without thinking. James could feel the heat from his thigh now, just a whisper away from his own. If he shifted even an inch-

His gaze flicked back to the direction Mikey had disappeared. The tension didn't ease. In fact, it coiled tighter.

Now. Now would be the time.

If someone were ever going to do something permanent, it'd be when no one was looking. When the shadows were thick, the bar loud, and the perfect alibi was sitting inches from you, warm and soft and blissfully unaware. But of course… James was just *thinking* . Fantasising. Hypothetically, even. Just another scenario running wild behind his eyes.

Right?

James turned his head toward Will, gaze soft but not quite settled. The lights of the bar painted shifting gold across Will's cheekbone, his lashes throwing little shadows under his eyes. "You gonna be okay for a sec?" James asked, tone laced with that half-playful, half-serious inflection he knew Will responded to. "I need to get a top-up- soda, obviously." A gesture with his empty glass, a soft clink against the table. "Not gonna abandon you long."

Will barely glanced up, the corners of his mouth quirking. "I think I can handle myself," he muttered, tapping the condensation on his glass. "Unless Mikey comes back and starts talking about your aura again."

James smiled. But it didn't reach his eyes. He stood slowly, brushing past Will with the ease of someone who'd planned an execution. Will didn't question him. Why would he? James had been gentle tonight. Charming. Perfect. Like he always was when he needed to be.

But the bar was behind him. He didn't move toward it.

Instead, his boots made a deliberate, padded turn- right toward the hallway Mikey had vanished into. And Will, sitting there in his glowing ignorance, didn't notice. He was too busy swirling the last of his drink, watching the ice melt. Trusting. James slipped past the edge of the crowd like smoke.

Time to take care of things.

II

James passed the dark alcove by the bathrooms, paused just for a second- long enough to register the flickering overhead bulb, the groaning plumbing behind the wall, the familiar hush of tile and metal and piss.

The door to the men's creaked under his hand.

And there Mikey was. At the sinks. Washing his hands like he hadn't just spent the last half hour jabbing James with passive-aggressive commentary and leeching poison into Will's ear. His ginger fringe was ruffled from the damp, his sleeves shoved up, skin on display like it were armour. He caught James' reflection in the mirror and didn't flinch.

"Don't tell me you're following me now," Mikey said, the smirk in his voice barely contained. He didn't look up. "Bit on the nose, don't you think?"

James stepped further in, let the door hiss shut behind him. "Just needed the loo," he said smoothly, voice syrup-thick with faux civility. "Didn't realise the toilet was now off-limits just because you're pissing in it."

Mikey turned then, drying his hands with a paper towel. His expression was pure disdain, casual and cruel in a way that didn't need effort. "Right. Coincidence. Like the flat opposite, the coffee shop, the way you always manage to be exactly where Will is."

James' jaw tensed for half a second. Then he smiled. Not kindly. "I'm trying to be civil."

"And I'm trying to stop my best friend from being stalked by a fucking psycho," Mikey shot back.

Ah. There it was. That word.

James felt something stir inside him. Not rage. No, rage would be too easy. It was colder than that. Simpler. Cleaner. The kind of detachment that said: noted. He stepped closer- just a fraction, just enough for the air between them to shift. "If I was what you think I am, Mikey," James said, tone silken, "you'd be wise not to keep pushing me."

The silence was a live wire between them. And Mikey, ever the brave idiot, laughed. "Wow," he muttered, brushing past James with a shoulder bump that was half accidental, half deliberate. "Creepy and dramatic. You really are the full package."

The fluorescent lights buzzed overhead like a threat. His own reflection blinked back at him- pale skin under cool-toned light, collar slightly skewed, a hint of a flush on his neck. He looked… normal. Unassuming. That was good, wasn't it?

That was the point.

James walked over and braced his hands on the sink edge, let his fingers curl around the porcelain. The chill grounded him, but only just. His heart was doing that thing it always did

when he thought too hard- that racing, stuttering rhythm, like it knew he was building something dangerous in his head.

He couldn't.

He shouldn't.

He wouldn't-

But…

The thought unfurled again, silk-smooth and sickly sweet. What if it was easy? What if the stars aligned just right- no witnesses, no questions, no mess? Mikey was the type who made enemies. Loud, snarky, a little too bold for his own good. He'd flirted with the edge for years- maybe no one would be surprised if the edge finally flirted back.

James exhaled shakily. No. No. This wasn't him. He wasn't- Wasn't what? Bad? Dangerous? A little broken? He stared at himself harder. Tried to find something good in his face. Something soft. But all he saw was calculation. The quiet kind. The kind you could mistake for calm until it was too late.

His jaw ticked. If he could cover it- if he could hide it properly, perfectly- maybe he wouldn't have to live in fear. Maybe Will wouldn't look at him like that anymore. With all that doubt. All that suspicion.

Maybe Mikey never needed to say another word. James stepped back from the sink, adjusted his collar, and gave the mirror a smile. It was fake. Mikey's voice cut through the silence like a blade dipped in honey- casual, but designed to wound.

"You alright there, mate?" he called from the sink beside him, all teeth, the sound sharp in the hush. "You look a bit… rattled."

Mikey leaned in closer. "Getting to you, am I?" he said, voice all faux sympathy, lips twisted into something that wanted to be a grin. "I mean, I'd be pretty twitchy too if I knew someone was finally clocking on."

James tilted his head slightly. The flicker of something unreadable passed across his face- not a smile, not quite rage. Maybe it was the first inch of control being lost. Mikey didn't stop. "It's weird, isn't it?" he continued, folding the used paper towel into a square. "How close you two live. How much you seem to know. Like… bordering on obsession. But I'm sure it's just a coincidence, right?"

Mikey tossed the paper towel into the bin like he was finishing a monologue, then gave James a look. Not afraid. Not yet. Just cocky. The kind of cocky that made James' knuckles itch. James finally spoke, his eyes dark and deep, staring at Mikey not directly, but through the mirror. "You always this threatened by men your best friend sleeps with?"

That wiped the smile for half a second. Just a second. But it was enough. James noted that the bathroom was silent besides their heated breathing. No stalls being used. Nobody at the sinks.

The door shut. It was almost… perfect.

James stared into the cracked mirror above the grimy sink, eyes tracing the sharp angles of his face like he's sizing up a stranger. The reflection was not quite his- like there's something darker lurking in the depths, something cold and unhinged that wasn't there before. His jaw tightened, lips curling almost imperceptibly into a smirk that didn't reach those eyes. The man in the glass wasn't the scared kid from years ago, no- he's a predator now. And damn, for a second, James flinched, like he'd caught a glimpse of the monster everyone else's nightmares are made of, but it's staring back at him.

Mikey leans in just enough for his voice to slip past James like a venomous whisper, dragging every word with a slow, cruel smile. "Look at you, trying so hard to keep it together. But that monster's not hiding, James. It's right there, creeping behind your eyes- probably the only thing real about you."

James felt the venom curl in his veins like fire, a sudden heat flooding his chest and clouding his mind. His jaw tightened, fists clench so hard his nails dig into his palms, and the cold mask he's worn so long shatters in an instant. The monster in the mirror wasn't just lurking- he's awake now, snarling, ready to tear down anyone who dares to push him. "You don't know shit, Mikey," James spits, voice low and dangerous, every word a razor edge. "So keep your venom to yourself before it's the last thing you ever do."

With a sudden, sharp movement- too fast for even himself to fully register- James' fist arcs forward, cutting through the stale air and connected with Mikey's jaw. The impact echoed in the cramped bathroom, a silent explosion behind closed doors. Mikey staggered back, caught off guard by the ferocity in James' eyes, and for a moment, everything hangs suspended in a brittle, charged silence.

Mikey's eyes widened, disbelief flashing across his face as he stumbled against the cold tile wall, clutching his jaw like he just tasted betrayal. James stood frozen for a heartbeat, chest heaving, heartbeat pounding like a war drum in his ears. The flickering fluorescent light above casted harsh shadows across his face- shadows that looked less like the man he once was and more like the monster he was trying not to become. The air felt thick, suffocating, but in that moment, something inside him fractured and sharpened all at once. Whatever happens next, there's no going back.

James didn't wait for Mikey to recover. His fist swung again- fast, brutal, fueled by a storm of years he's bottled up. The second punch landed with a sickening crack, Mikey's head snapped to the side like a ragdoll caught in a gust. The bathroom's stale air vibrated with the tension, every second stretching out unbearably. James felt the surge- the dark power of control, of release- and knows this is the line he's crossed. There's no mercy left in him tonight.

James's fury spilled out with every hit, fists hammering down like a storm unleashed, relentless and raw. Between blows, his breath hitched, sharp and ragged, and venom dripped from his words, each spit cutting deeper than the last. "Thought you owned him? Thought you were untouchable? You're nothing but a parasite, crawling in his life like the trash you are."

His knuckles scraped skin, blood mixing with rage, and every punch is a dark promise- Mikey won't just walk away from this. Not tonight. Not ever.

The sound cut through the chaos- a sharp, almost startled whimper from Mikey, fragile and broken beneath James' onslaught. The raw violence isn't just physical; it's a purge, a release of all the twisted hate and frustration pent up for too long.

James didn't stop. His fists rained down with merciless intent, every strike a sentence in the brutal conversation he was forcing Mikey to listen to. Mikey's breath hitched, eyes wide, shrinking back- no more smug smirks, just the desperate whimper of a man finally seeing the monster he's been poking.

Mikey's panic flipped, his survival instinct snapping awake. He lashed out, desperate and wild, striking James with a shaky, uncoordinated punch. It landed- clumsily, but enough to jar James for a heartbeat. James stumbled back, eyes narrowing into a cold, dangerous gleam. The fight's far from over. This just lit a fire beneath him, stoked the dark obsession driving every brutal move. His hands found Mikey's throat, his thumbs pushing down on his airway with no forgiveness. Mikey's body thrashed and flailed, desperate for release.

James' voice was low and venomous, dripping with cruel calm: "Pathetic. You're just another mistake I'm about to erase- don't waste your breath, Mikey."

Eyes rolled back. Mikey's hands gripped and scratched at James' biceps through his shirt- perhaps drawing blood with the force of it. His hands found James' chest, pummelling it with weak fists. James almost laughed at the attempt of it. Mikey's face was contorted into a fear James had never seen before- like a man who had just realised he was already queued for death.

Stillness.

James released the body. Stood there, chest heaving, breath shallow and ragged like he'd been running from himself. His knuckles stung, slick with a mix of sweat and something darker- something raw and unforgiving. The room felt heavy, thick with silence that pressed down on him like a vice. He stepped back slowly, eyes flickering away from the mess he'd made, the cold sweat on his skin turned icy as the weight of what he'd done crashed over him like a tidal wave. Without thinking, he'd bolted for the sink, clutching the edges of the porcelain basin as if it were the only thing holding him upright.

Then it came- violent, involuntary. He retched hard, the bitter sting of bile clawing up his throat. It burned, it scalded, but it didn't compare to the white-hot horror threading through his chest. His hands trembled. His mind raced, frantic, looping the moment again and again. It had been too fast. Too real. Too final. And there was no undoing it now.

But it wasn't like he was never prepared. His ears rang. Mikey's body lay just behind him, slumped and quiet. And that was when clarity, cold and clinical, slid into him like ice water.

This couldn't look like *this* .

His eyes darted around the room- clockwork fast, methodical, surgical. The floor beneath Mikey was already wet, a glistening sheen from the half-mopped tiles stretching out from a yellow bucket in the corner. No caution sign. No witness. No cameras. And the soap dispenser on the wall? Cracked. Good. Better.

James crouched down beside the body, his fingers twitching only slightly. He nudged Mikey's head, gently- too gently- so that it lolled against the sharp, ceramic edge of the sink. He adjusted the slump of his limbs, let them fall in a way that could be read as gravity's fault, not his.

It looked… tragic.

Accidental.

Believable.

He stood back, taking it all in with the eye of a perfectionist. A misplaced step. A drunken man. An unmarked wet floor. It was all just *unfortunate* . James licked his lips, wiped his fingerprints off the faucet with the inside hem of his jacket, and whispered, voice hoarse and low, "There. That's better."

His hands trembled. Not with guilt- that was somewhere deep, buried, unreachable- but with calculation. The kind that comes after the monster takes its breath. The kind that comes when the smoke starts to clear and all that's left is the wreckage. He looked down at his fingers.

He hadn't worn gloves. The thought sliced through him like a wire. Thin. Immediate. Unforgiving. Fingerprints.

Of course. Of course.

His stomach twisted again, but this time it wasn't from the earlier purge of adrenaline. It was something tighter, more clinical. There'd be prints on the sink. The door. The mirror. The-

His eyes snapped to the stall handle. Every surface felt like it was screaming at him now, echoing with invisible versions of himself. Tiny traces, tiny betrayals. It was like leaving a breadcrumb trail right back to the wolf's den. He clenched his fists to stop the shaking.

It wasn't panic. It couldn't be. Panic was sloppy. Panic made mistakes. No- this needed thought. Precision. Calm. He had to think about *everything* he'd touched. And then… make sure none of it remembered him.

He had a rag in his pocket. A *special* one.

Don't ever say James Marriott is unprepared.

James stepped up to the bar like any other patron- shoulders rolled back, expression unreadable. The lights overhead were low and warm, pooling in puddles across the countertop. He leaned one elbow against the surface, gaze flicking lazily over the drink options chalked on the board behind the bar, even though he already knew what he'd order.

His heart was still hammering like it didn't get the memo that everything was *fine* .

When the bartender approached, James offered a soft, polite smile- just the right mix of charming and forgettable. "Just a soda, please. Lime, if you've got it."

The bartender nodded, moved away. James kept his eyes ahead, scanning the mirrored shelves like he was reading the labels. Like he wasn't counting the seconds. Like he wasn't aware of every molecule of sweat beading at the base of his spine. The drink was placed in front of him. Effervescent. Innocent. He sipped it, letting the bubbles sting his tongue.

James wandered back through the crowd, soda in hand, weaving between tables with an unbothered calm that didn't match the tautness in his shoulders. He played it like he always did- easygoing, forgettable, background noise in a loud room. A ghost in the flesh. Will spotted him first. He straightened up a little, drumming his fingers nervously against his nearly-empty glass. His eyes flicked behind James, scanning, expecting a second shadow.

But there was none.

James slid into the booth beside him, setting his soda down with a dull clink. Will raised an eyebrow, looking toward the hallway. "He's been gone a while," he said, tone light, but with an edge of curiosity. "Mikey."

James sipped his drink, licking a drop of citrus off his bottom lip. "Has he?"

Will gave him a look. James shrugged, cool as a fucking cucumber. "Maybe the line's long. Or maybe he's avoiding me." He offered a lopsided smirk, like it was a joke, like the world hadn't just tilted on its axis.

Will glanced at the hallway again.

James didn't. He just leaned back, cradling his drink between his hands, watching Will instead. Because for now, Mikey wasn't the one who mattered.

III

Back at James' flat, the warm glow of the lamps softened the edges of the night. They were sprawled on the floor, legs tangled under a small coffee table littered with cheese, crackers, and an embarrassingly fancy bottle of wine James had swiped from some market haul. He didn't drink. It wasn't for him.

Will laughed- this time a full, genuine laugh- at some stupid joke James made about the perfect cheese-to-cracker ratio. "You're obsessed, mate."

James grinned, the kind of sly smile that said, *Yeah, I am.* "I take my snacking very seriously. Someone's gotta have standards around here."

They clinked their glasses together gently (James' a mix of lemonade and juice), their fingers brushing- innocent enough, but enough to set James' heart hammering. Will's eyes caught his, sparkling with something soft, unguarded.

"So," Will said, nibbling a cracker, "this- us- this is nice. No weird drama. Just… cheese and bad jokes."

James nodded, biting back the urge to tell Will all the things- about Mikey, the watching, the spiraling. But that was a conversation for another night. For now, this moment was theirs.

"Yeah," James said, voice low, teasing, "just cheese, crackers, and me, of course. The real prize."

Will rolled his eyes, but his smile betrayed him. "Big prize, huh?" He shook his damp hair back, water droplets scattering like tiny rebellions. "Still soaked through," he muttered, voice thick with amusement- and maybe a little exasperation.

James watched, a slow grin curling his lips. Because on the way out of the bar, James had pulled the fire alarm, just like that, soaking the entire place in a cascade from the sprinklers. The chaos, the shrieks, the drenched, furious patrons... It had been messy, loud, and absolutely brilliant. He'd laughed with Will about the whole mess, joking how the universe just loved to cause chaos for them. But beneath the surface? That wet disaster had been James' perfect cover, a little chaos engineered to make Mikey's slip later that much more believable.

James grinned, sliding a cracker across the table like a smooth operator. "Well, you know," he said, eyes glinting with mischief as he gave a slow wiggle of his eyebrows, "maybe some… physical activity might help you dry off quicker."

He chuckled, low and teasing, watching Will's reaction like a cat watching a mouse. "Or, I dunno, you could just stay soaked. Adds character."

Will snorted, shaking his head as droplets flew off his damp hair. "Physical activity, huh? You're such a terrible influence," he shot back, voice low, playful, eyes flickering with that mix of amusement and something deeper.

James leaned back, that sly smirk still curling his lips, watching the way Will's gaze lingered on him a moment too long. "Terrible's just my default setting," James said, voice dropping an octave, "but hey, somebody's gotta keep you on your toes."

Their knees brushed under the table- accidental, or maybe not- and James didn't pull away. Nope. He let the moment stretch, sweet and electric, savoring the buzz that came from the smallest, most deliberate touch.

James' smirk deepened as he edged his leg a fraction closer, brushing ever so gently against Will's calf. The contact was subtle but electric, like a live wire humming between them, and he caught the hitch in Will's breath- just a whisper, but loud enough for James to hear.

"See? Physical activity," James teased, voice low, sultry, "works wonders. You're already looking a little… better." His eyes traced the line of Will's jaw, the curve of his neck, the slight flush rising beneath that damp hair.

Will's lips twitched, a slow grin spreading as he leaned in just enough for their shoulders to touch. "You're relentless," he muttered, but the teasing edge had softened, replaced by something almost… vulnerable. James caught it, that flicker of openness, and it made his chest tighten in a way he hadn't expected. He let his fingers brush Will's hand on the table, their skin grazing, testing, promising.

There was a silence between them. Not the kind that begged to be filled, but the kind that *demanded* reverence.

Will's hand was still under James', warm and unmoving. His damp hair clung to his forehead in small curls, drops sliding down the sides of his neck like something divine. The air was charged, thick with something heavier than flirtation now. Something real.

James' eyes trailed over Will's face, memorising it with a hunger that was oddly reverent- like he was afraid to look away in case this wasn't real. In case this moment, *this version* of Will- soft and warm in the afterglow of laughter, sitting cross-legged on James' sofa, skin damp and eyes wide- would vanish if he blinked too long.

"James," Will said, so quietly it barely counted as sound.

And James... James just leaned in.

There was no dramatic sweep, no rush. Just gravity. Like they'd been pulled together by the centre of something ancient and inevitable.

Their lips met- soft, tentative at first. James kissed him like a question, and Will answered without hesitation. He leaned in fully, one hand sliding up to cradle James' jaw, fingers curling gently behind his ear. James exhaled into the kiss- finally, finally, like the pressure had been building for weeks and this, *this* , was the release. Not lust, not hunger, not even victory. Just that dizzying, aching tenderness of having something he'd wanted for so long- and being met halfway.

This wasn’t like before. This wasn’t the need for sex- this was the need for mutual affection, between two men who wanted each other. Will smiled against his lips, barely a breath of air between them.

“You’re better when you’re not talking,” he whispered.

James chuckled, his forehead resting against Will’s now, lips still brushing. “That’s rich, coming from someone who moans over pastry.”

They stayed like that for a moment longer, foreheads touching, the tips of their noses brushing like they weren’t quite ready to let go. Outside, the city hummed like a lullaby. It was quiet in the flat. Not empty, but full. Full of something unspeakable and warm. Full of everything James had spent years convincing himself he didn’t need. Will let out a breathy laugh, his thumb grazing James’ cheek. “Okay,” he murmured, eyes shining with something unreadable. “Okay. That wasn’t bad.”

James smiled. Not his usual smug twist of the mouth, something softer. Private. “Just wait until round two,” he said.

Will rolled his eyes, but he didn’t pull away. Instead, he leaned back in, their hands still tangled, their knees still touching. And for once- just once- James didn’t feel like he needed to prove anything.

Not to Will. Not to himself. Not tonight.

Tonight, he was allowed to just *be* .

IIII

James sat on the bench like he'd been poured into it, legs crossed at the ankle, back straight, every inch of him looking like control- until you looked closer. Then you saw the twitch in his thumb, tapping rhythmically against his thigh. Tap. Tap. Tap. A pulse made visible. Otto's brown head poked out from the worn satchel beside him, ears flicking in the breeze. James glanced down and exhaled slowly, like he had something to confess to the cat.

"Alright," he murmured, "let's say we pretend I'm the bad guy, hmm?"

Otto stared. Judgemental.

James looked back out over the park. Empty, save for a woman jogging with headphones in, a toddler screaming about pigeons. "It's been- what- two weeks?" he said, lips curling slightly. "Two weeks since that *little accident* at the bar. You'd think I'd get a thank you card."

The sarcasm felt stale on his tongue.

He reached down, idly smoothing a hand over Otto's back. "Will's been quiet. And I mean *quiet* ." A beat. "Radio silence. Not even a pity like on my story. Cold, don't you think? Almost like someone's grieving."

Otto purred, oblivious or uncaring. James's smile thinned. "He knows. Or he suspects. He must. Mikey's name had to come up eventually. You don't just…" James flicked his fingers vaguely, "...vanish. People talk."

He leaned forward slightly, elbows on knees, eyes narrowed as if the grass held answers. "Maybe he's giving me time to explain. Or maybe he's trying to decide if he should report me."

A pause. James laughed under his breath. "Wouldn't that be delicious."

He leaned back again, tilting his head toward the sky. "The tragedy is, I was right. Mikey was in the way. He always *would've* been. It was a necessary correction. Like pruning dead branches. Now everything can grow."

James glanced down. Otto was dozing. "You're lucky, you know," he muttered. "You don't overthink. You don't pull away. You just… exist. No guilt. No second guessing."

He looked back out over the park, and his voice dropped to a whisper, like he was telling a secret to the wind. "Will's not like that. He *feels* . Which means he *hurts* . And when he hurts…"

He smiled.

"He comes to me."

Otto shifted inside the bag, a lazy roll, his nose pressing curiously against the mesh window like he was trying to smell the wind. His tail flicked once, then twice, the movement sharp like he was attacking James' quiet, crawling thoughts.

James looked down again, resting a hand gently on the top of the satchel, palm curved like he was steadying himself more than comforting the cat. "You miss him too, don't you?" he said softly. "The noise. The presence. The way he always reached for you first."

Otto gave no reply, just a small huff of breath against the netting. James exhaled through his nose, eyes half-lidded. "You're not subtle, y'know. Always rubbing against his ankles like he was *yours* . Like you chose him."

He smiled, but it didn't reach anything human. His hand curled, a slow stroke against Otto's fur. "Traitor."

The word was said lightly- almost fondly. Almost. Otto yawned, sharp white teeth flashing, utterly uninterested in the drama of man. James leaned down slightly, whispering now, like it was just for them. "You saw him. You saw how he looked at me before everything started falling apart. There was something there, wasn't there?"

Otto blinked at him.

"Don't look at me like that," James muttered. "He wanted me. He *wants* me. Even if he's scared. Even if Mikey-" He stopped. The name caught in his throat like smoke.

Otto pawed at the mesh, little claws scratching lightly. James tilted his head. "I did it for him. He just… doesn't know that yet."

He straightened, spine rigid now. "But he will." His fingers drummed the bench beside him- tap. tap. tap. Always three beats. Always neat. Always rehearsed. James was still watching the mesh shift slightly with each of Otto's breaths when something tugged at the edge of his vision.

Movement. Rhythmic. Familiar.

His head turned, slow as honey sliding down glass. There, cutting through the green of the park path like it was *his* , was Will. James blinked. Once. Twice. A white t-shirt, half-slick with sweat and clinging to his chest in the breeze. Dark shorts. Headphones in, head down. He was jogging- steady pace, long strides. Fluid. *Beautiful.*

James forgot to breathe.

For a moment, everything in his body hushed. No spiral. No noise. No guilt. Just *him* . Will. Alive. Moving. Glowing with the kind of ease James had never known in his life. He watched the way the sunlight bounced off his skin, caught in his hair. The way his jaw clenched slightly with each breath. The way his body *moved* - like he belonged here, in the world. Like he fit.

And he hadn't seen him.

James stayed very still. Like if he moved too fast, the moment would evaporate. He let his gaze roam, slow and indulgent. He took his time. He *always* took his time with Will. Otto pawed at the side of the bag again, maybe picking up on the change in James' pulse, maybe just bored. James reached down, absently smoothing the fur behind Otto's ear without looking away.

"He's here," he murmured, almost in awe. "And he doesn't even know it."

Will passed by the path across the pond, too far to hear, too lost in his own world to notice the quiet storm on the bench, watching every footfall like scripture. pace started to slow near the bench-lined edge of the loop, breath coming heavier now, chest rising and falling with each step. He tugged at the hem of his damp shirt, swiping sweat from his brow.

And then- those eyes.

Will looked up. For just a moment, it seemed like he was gazing past the bench- past the people- like he wasn't really paying attention. But no.

His eyes landed right on James.

It was like getting hit. Like being *seen* too clearly, too suddenly, too much. James felt his stomach twist. Will slowed even further, steps faltering. His brows furrowed. His lips parted slightly. Surprise. Hesitation. And something James couldn't quite place- uncertainty, maybe. Or maybe just the rawness of seeing someone you haven't decided how to feel about yet.

James straightened just a little, one arm thrown casually over the back of the bench. Cool. Calm. Perched like he *owned* the park. Otto gave a soft little chirp from the bag. Will looked at the bag. Then at James. And then he smiled.

It was small. Controlled. Not like the ones James used to collect from him like rare coins. But it was real. James felt it like a punch to the throat. Will raised his hand in a brief wave. Just two fingers. A simple gesture. But James *tracked* it like a lifeline.

He raised his own hand in return. A mirror. A performance.

Will kept jogging. Past him. Past the bench. Just like that. But James saw it- *knew* it- when Will slowed again just before the path curved out of sight. A pause. The smallest tilt of his head, like he was checking to see if James was still watching.

Of course he was.

He always was.

And when Will disappeared around the bend, James let out a breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding. "You saw that, right?" he whispered to Otto. "He saw me. He looked." The cat blinked slowly.

James smiled, sharp and bright. A match just before it's struck. "Oh, baby," he murmured, fingers tightening around the strap of Otto's bag. "We're back in the game."

James sat on the windowsill like he was part of the architecture. One leg bent beneath him, the other hooked lazily under the wooden frame, bare toes brushing the radiator. Otto was curled nearby, a slow-moving loaf of fur, tail flicking every few seconds.

The sky outside was slate blue, bruised with the threat of rain. James stared across the street- eyes locked on the flat that belonged to Will Lenney. He twirled a spoon in the mug clasped between his hands. The coffee inside had long gone cold, but he hadn't noticed. His thoughts were loud tonight. Will had seen him. In the park. That hadn't been imagined. It wasn't projection or paranoia or fantasy- it was *real* . A look. A wave. A moment.

God, it was almost *tender* .

But now? Will's curtains were closed.

His lights were on- faint slats of golden warmth peeking through the gaps- but he was hidden. Shut away. Unreachable. Like James hadn't just *seen him* mere hours ago, sweat-drenched and beautiful, smiling like a memory that never really left. James exhaled slowly through his nose, watching the condensation fog the glass for a moment before fading.

"Don't disappear again," he murmured, voice low and threadbare. "Don't make me come looking."

Otto purred at the edge of the sill, not in comfort, but like he *agreed* . James tilted his head slightly, catching the faint shadow that moved behind Will's curtains. Someone was home. Will was home. But no message. No knock at the door. No late-night muffins.

The chill of the glass was seeping through his skin like a reminder of all the things he couldn't escape- his spiraling thoughts, the weight of silence, the ghost of Mikey still lurking somewhere too close for comfort. His fingers drummed nervously against the frame, tracing invisible patterns as the city lights blinked below, indifferent to the chaos inside his head.

Then, his phone buzzed- sharp, urgent, impossible to ignore. His heart seized, his breath hitching like a kid caught stealing. *Will.* The name burned across the screen, a beacon and a threat all at once. He hesitated a moment, fingers trembling as he swiped. The line clicked alive. Will's voice poured through the speaker, soft and cautious, "Did I wake you?"

James' throat tightened, the familiar sound like a thread pulling him back from the edge. His voice came out low, rough-edged, "No… just couldn't sleep. You?"

There was a pause, like the weight of unspoken words filling the space. Then Will's laugh, a quiet, half-smile in sound, "Same. Thought I'd check in. You looked like you had a lot on your mind."

James swallowed down the flood of emotions that threatened to drown him. *Too much on my mind to say out loud.* Instead, he let his gaze drift to the shadowy street below, catching Will's silhouette in his imagination- alone, probably haunted by his own ghosts. "Maybe," James finally admitted, voice barely a whisper. "Feels like everything's spinning."

And beneath it all, the desperate hope that maybe, just maybe, Will would understand. But the fear was still there- deep and raw- that if he opened too wide, he'd shatter completely. So he stayed quiet, letting the silence stretch between them like a fragile thread waiting to snap.

Will's voice cracks a little over the phone, low and raw, "James… have you heard about Mikey? It's… it's fucked up. I can't even wrap my head around it. Like, it doesn't feel real."

James felt it like a punch to the gut, a cold thread winding tight in his chest. His fingers stilled against the windowframe, eyes flickering to the dark street below as if the shadows might spit out some truth. His mind screamed *stay calm,* but his heart was a wildfire.

"Yeah," James said, voice low and clipped. "I heard." He swallowed hard. "It's… complicated."

Will's voice cracked, the usual teasing edge stripped away, laid bare like an open wound. "Honestly? I'm devastated. Mikey was... more than just a mate, you know? It's like- like I'm stuck in some messed-up dream where someone else deals with this, not me."

He paused, and James could imagine him running a shaky hand through his hair, eyes darkening with frustration and disbelief. "And the craziest part? That he slipped. One tiny moment, and everything just... snapped. How the hell does that even happen? It's like life's playing some sick joke."

James feels that tight twist in his chest, the familiar itch of guilt and something sharper- like a knife twisting, but also… pity? He swallows, leans against the cold glass of the window, and his voice is steady but soft, "Will, it's okay to feel like that. It's okay to mourn. You don't have to be strong all the time. You're allowed to break, even if it feels like the world's spinning off its axis."

Will sighs heavy, voice thick with that raw edge, "It's such a fucking weird way to go, James. I don't buy it. Not for a second. But what can I even do? Nothing. Just gotta move on, or at least try. I'm shit with loss. Always have been. Makes everything worse."

James hears the fight in Will's words- the bitter kind of resignation you only get when someone's been shoved too hard by life. And deep down, he knows Will's carrying a storm behind those blue eyes, a storm James wouldn't dare calm. James's fingers curled tighter around the phone, voice low but steady. "So... what do you need, Will? What's really going on?"

Will's sigh cracked through the line, heavy and frustrated. "You never liked Mikey anyway. Maybe you're enjoying that he's gone. Like it's easier for you."

James almost laughed, almost, but the edge in Will's voice wasn't a joke. "That's rich, coming from you. Like you think I'm some villain just because I can't stand him breathing

the same air as me. I didn't kill him, if that's what you're thinking. But yeah, maybe I'm not sorry he's out of the picture."

A pause. The silence between them was thick, saturated with tension, secrets, and half-truths neither dared say aloud. Will's voice softened, but the bite was still there. "You don't get to play innocent with me, James. You're tangled in all of this, and I can't tell if you're protecting me or just protecting yourself."

James's heart thrummed, fast and jagged, but his voice dropped to a whisper. "Maybe a bit of both. Maybe I want to be the one you trust when it all falls apart."

Will's breath hitched. "You want to be trusted... but you build walls so damn high."

James closed his eyes, fighting the urge to hide behind his usual mask, but it felt too raw tonight. "Yeah, well... it's easier than falling apart in front of you."

The line went quiet. And then Will said, softer this time, "Maybe it's time to stop running, James. Maybe it's time to let me in."

Did Will know? Could he possibly know that James had been the one to end Mikey? No way. There was no evidence. None. The panic clawed at his chest, but logic whispered in the dark: Mikey was gone. Just gone. And no one could tie it back to him. Yet the thought still slithered beneath his skin like a poison.

Does Will see it? The question burned hotter than any confession. James stared out the window, the streetlight casting long shadows, twisting into all the ghosts he never dared to face. He needed to keep his mask tight, tighter than ever- because if Will ever even *suspected* , the fragile thread holding them together would snap.

But maybe, just maybe... James told himself, he could finally be the one Will trusted. Without Mikey's shadow looming, without that threat eating away at their moments. That was the dangerous, tempting thought that kept his fingers trembling on the screen.

James cleared his throat, voice steady but just a shade too smooth. "Yeah, Will. I get it. Weird all around. But, you know... life moves on, right?"

He gave a small, almost dismissive pause, like he wasn't drowning in the chaos underneath. "Anyway, take care of yourself. Catch you later."

And with that, he ended the call, the click echoing louder in his chest than it should've. James let the phone slip from his ear, eyes drifting back to the window. Through the dim light, he caught Will's silhouette framed by the soft glow of his flat. Will's hand tossed his phone carelessly onto (he assumed) the table. Then, like a man wrestling invisible demons, he lifted both hands to his head, fingers running through his hair in a silent gesture of frustration.

James's lips twitched into a smirk. So fragile. So human. So beautifully cracked. He leaned back on the windowsill, the city lights bleeding in through the glass.

How the hell did he get here? James let the question burn in the back of his skull, crawling through every cracked corner of his mind. A slow, suffocating spiral, dragging him down past every “just a bit obsessed” moment to the place where obsession warps into something ugly. Something *real* .

He thought about the cameras, the nights spent watching Will breathe like some sacred ritual. The way his heart had lurched when he’d seen Mikey enter Will’s flat- like a goddamn invasion. And then the… *thing* he’d done. The line he’d crossed, that dark and slippery slope no one wanted to admit existed. Was this love? Control? A sickness? Maybe all of it. The more he tried to pull back, the deeper he sank. He wasn’t just watching anymore. He was tangled, knotted into every shadow and secret.

James’ phone buzzed, slicing through the quiet hum of his flat. He blinked, a cold sweat creeping across his neck as he plucked the device from the ledge. The message preview gleamed like a challenge, cold and sharp: *“Come over. Now.”*

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for breaking a few hearts with that death scene... So let's just do a teeny bit of extra analysis shall we?

Having James kill Mikey in the bathroom shows his control fully breaking down. Bathrooms are private, raw spaces, where people fall apart. So it’s the perfect setting for James to lose his composure. He’s been calculated, clean, watching from the shadows. But this is impulsive, messy, uncontained. The symbolism is sharp: a place meant for cleansing becomes a crime scene. It’s not just Mikey dying, it’s James unraveling. And on top of this- James even seems somewhat prepared. Almost shocked as the suddenness of his own actions. It's like he KNEW he would break.

James doing something sexual with Will after killing Mikey is what I thought would convey peak manipulation wrapped in a twisted cocktail of guilt, dominance, and delusion. Okay, so yes, it’s damage control, lulling Will into a false sense of security, making sure he stays close before the truth creeps in. But deeper down it’s James apologising the only way he knows how (through control disguised as intimacy). His version of “sorry” is skin-to-skin, breathless, and laced with secrets. And maybe, in a really fucking sick way, it’s a celebration too. He got rid of the threat. Now Will’s all his. It’s not love, it’s possession dressed up as tenderness. A victory lap in the shape of a kiss. And I felt that it was... perfect to end a tense night.

I wanted to have James being slightly cold and unforgiving during the phone call while Will is mourning. It’s so jarring it feels like emotional whiplash. Will's raw, grieving, barely holding it together and Mr. Marriott is detached, controlled. Like he’s performing sympathy, not feeling it. It's all theatre, no soul.

But the fact Will isn’t entirely repelled by it is something I wanted to bring forward. That’s the rot. It shows just how deep James has burrowed into him and how distorted Will’s sense of emotional normal has become. He’s been conditioned to expect coldness as care, tension as love. James doesn’t even have to be kind, he just has to stay. And Will lets him. Because the manipulation worked. Because the hook is in too deep. I'm evil, aren't I?

Finally, I am so so thankful that everybody is so into my story! I absolutely adore reading all your little points and your own discoveries and theories. Analysis is delectable, give me more.

Love!

See you soon.

The Game

Chapter Summary

I: 'TV' - Billie Eilish
II: 'The Night We Met' - Lord Huron, Phoebe Bridgers
III: 'Kerosene' - Crystal Castles
IIII: 'Tentpole Shangrila' - Djo

Chapter Notes

Hello my pretties! Another chapter for you! This one is quite heavy. You know what I'm like, I hate warnings. But it is not for the faint of heart, and I must warn you of this if I want to stay a decent person. Although I assume at this point anybody still reading is not faint hearted anyway and already knows the sort of thing I write.

Enjoy my lovelies!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I

The ground squelched under his too-big trainers.

James- ten, maybe eleven- stepped carefully over the spongy bank, his arms tucked close to his body like he could make himself smaller, lighter, harder to see. His hoodie sleeves were pulled down over his hands, hiding chewed fingernails and forming two pathetic fists of fabric.

The lake didn't look like the ones in films.

It was still. Not peaceful, but stagnant. Water the colour of spit, filmed with green. It smelled like something had died in it weeks ago. The wind barely moved here, and the trees leaned in too close, casting the whole thing in damp shade. James didn't care.

The shouting at the campsite had started again, and his stomach had curled in on itself the way it always did. He knew the rhythm by now: the crack of a can, the rising voice, the sudden slam or crash, and the inevitable silence where nobody spoke or moved. That silence was worse than the shouting. It filled up your ears like cold water.

So he walked.

His trainers were muddy. His knees were already soaked. But the lake didn't yell at him, or tell him he was weird. It didn't care if he was quiet or if he drew pictures in the margins of his maths books instead of doing the problems.

He stood at the water's edge, arms still folded, and stared out at the murky surface like it might offer something better. He didn't flinch when something shifted in the reeds a few metres down the shoreline. He just blinked slowly. Tired. Still.

Because being still had always made him invisible. It was a small sound. A rustle, a breath, the tiniest crack of a twig. He didn't whip around like other kids. Fast movements made you a target. The reeds shifted again. He took a step closer. Mud squelched around his shoes, sucking them deeper into the earth like the lake wanted him too.

Then it appeared.

A fox.

Young, probably. Too small to be alone. Its fur was matted to one side- wet, caked in mud and something darker. There was a gash along its leg, raw and trembling. It didn't run when it saw him. It just stood there, chest rising and falling in small, panicked jolts, eyes wide and glassy.

James stared.

The fox blinked.

And James, who had always been told he was odd for watching things too long, for noticing too much, crouched slowly into the mud. His knees soaked through instantly. He reached out a hand. His fingers were shaking. Not from fear- no, not that. From... awe, maybe.

The fox didn't move.

He breathed. Shallow. Quiet. His hand hovered, then brushed against the soaked fur. It was warm. Alive. "I won't hurt you," James whispered, his voice cracking on the word *you* .

And he meant it. God, he meant it. He pulled the sleeves further over his palms, cradling the fox like it was something sacred. Something broken that could be mended if only he could keep it warm, keep it safe, keep it away from-

"JAMES!"

The voice exploded like thunder behind him. He flinched. The fox tensed in his arms. Too late. Boots crashed through the reeds. The stink of beer hit before the man did.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

James stood. Didn't run. Didn't speak. His father was red-faced and already halfway through his next sentence. Something about disease. About filth. About how he should've drowned him the day he was born. James just held the fox tighter.

That was a mistake.

His father's boots sank into the bank with a wet *slop* , the reeds bending away from him like even the plants knew to flee. Beer sloshed in the can he still held, half-crushed in his grip, foam dripping over his fingers.

James didn't flinch. Not outwardly. Not where the man could see. He stood still, jaw set, shoulders tense- but inside, oh, inside he was nothing but wires and sparks, trying not to shake.

The fox twitched in his arms.

Its body was rigid. Trembling. Heart pounding so hard James could feel it against his chest. He looked down at it- its wide, unblinking eyes- and something hollow split open inside him. It was scared of him. Not James.

Him.

His father.

The same fear. The exact same fucking fear.

"You deaf, boy?" The man snarled. "I said what the *hell* do you think you're doing? Playing Snow White with some rabid piece of vermin?"

James didn't speak. His father stepped closer. The beer can crunched under his grip. "You trying to catch something? You wanna end up frothing at the mouth like your *whore* of a mother said you would? Jesus Christ, James- what are you, *touched* ?"

James stared at the fox. The fox stared at nothing. "I said drop it!" His father's voice cracked the air like a whip. "Put that filthy fucking thing down before it bites your stupid fingers off. You don't know what it's got- mange, rot, *fucking worms* . That thing's gonna die anyway."

James finally looked up.

He wanted to say: *It's just scared.*

But he couldn't. Because the moment he opened his mouth, his father would step in and fill it with rage. He'd done it before. He always did. So instead, James did the one thing he could. He held it tighter. Not to defy him. Not even to be brave. Just to let the fox know... *I'm scared too.*

His father's hand shot forward- not to hit James, not yet- but to rip. Fingers latched into the scruff of the fox like it was nothing but a bundle of disease-ridden fur. James felt the weight leave his arms so suddenly it knocked the breath from his chest. "No-!"

It slipped out. Just that. One word. One syllable. But it was too much. His father snarled. " *No?* You *don't* tell me *no* , boy."

And then, without ceremony, without a single ounce of care, he turned- wound his arm like a shot-put- and hurled the creature. The fox arced through the air. A flash of red. A broken cry. A twitch of limbs in motion.

Then- *splash* .

It hit the lake like a stone. Water rippled. Softly. Calmly. The surface swallowed the chaos, and then smoothed over, like it hadn't happened at all. James watched the spot. Watched it long after the rings of disturbance had stilled. There was no thrashing. No resurfacing. His arms still held the ghost-weight of it. His shirt, where it had pressed against him, was damp. A single copper-red hair clung to the cotton.

His father's shadow stretched over him- big and bloated in the slanting twilight. And then the voice, thick with drink and disgust. "You're not right in the head, boy. D'you hear me?"

James didn't answer. He couldn't. His throat felt like it had swallowed gravel. "Pickin' up animals like some kinda freak. Runnin' off on your own like a goddamn *girl* . You want rabies? You want worms crawl outta your *eyes* , is that it?"

Still, James said nothing. He just blinked at the lake, the phantom ripples that no longer existed.

"Oh, you think you're *better* than me, don't you? With your little drawings. With your quiet. Walkin' round like you're some fucking genius, like you're watchin' us all. Well guess what, boy— *I see you.* You ain't better than no one. You're just broken."

That's when the boot came. Right into the side of James' ribs. He hit the dirt hard. His palm scraped raw against stone, cheek kissing mud, lungs screaming as they fought for air. Above him, the man loomed, still spitting hate like a broken tap. "You're gonna end up in a *cage* , you know that? That's where they put things like *you.* "

James lay there, panting. But not crying. He never cried anymore. His cheek was bleeding, his elbow throbbed, and he stared down the slope toward the lake, watching how it didn't care. It just rippled. Smoothed. Silenced.

Like it could bury anything.

Even men like his father.

His father's curses echoed off the trees as he stomped back toward the fire, dragging his poison with him like a shadow that stained everything it touched. The sounds of snapping twigs and the clink of a beer bottle came next. Then silence. Or rather, the kind of silence that throbbed- all tension, no peace.

James didn't move. He lay there a while, cheek to the cold ground, ribs aching with each breath. A beetle crawled past his hand. The earth didn't care. The world didn't stop. No one came running.

Eventually, he sat up. The lake was still there. Still smooth. Still uncaring. Where the fox had sunk, there was no sign of struggle. Just calm. Stillness. It could've been anywhere. It could've never existed.

James pressed a hand to his ribs, winced, and then got to his feet. Slowly. Quietly. He didn't cry. Not because he wasn't sad. But because crying implied someone might help.

That night, long after his parents had passed out beside the dying campfire, James crept back to the lake. The moon had risen, making the surface shine like stretched glass. Too perfect. Too still. He stood at the edge and imagined pushing his father in.

It wasn't a fantasy of revenge. It wasn't rage. It was peace. It was silence.

He didn't do it.

But he *thought* about it. And that was the first time something inside him shifted.

That night, he stopped believing in safety. And for the first time in his short, bruised life- he understood the power of still water and secret thoughts. The violence in quiet places. The beauty in imagining a world without someone. And he liked it.

He stared out at the place where the fox had disappeared. No ripples now, no trace. Just black water swallowing everything it touched. And maybe, in the end, he wasn't that different.

Maybe he was just another small, broken thing someone had called filthy. Diseased. Too strange to save. Tossed into the world without a second thought. And like the fox, he'd sunk quiet. No flailing. As if it knew it would drown.

A boy learning how to drown and call it survival.

II

James steps through Will's door, the late evening light catching the smirk on his face. Before he can even close the door behind him, Will's voice cuts through the quiet like a razor- sharp, teasing, and dripping with that familiar sass.

"Honestly, you're the most fucking annoying person I know. You never listen, do you?"

James just rolls his eyes, the kind of slow, knowing grin that says *I heard every word, and you love it* . His tone's smooth, calculated, a little cheeky. "Oh, I'm all ears… when I want to be."

Will flicks his hair back, eyes darkening with something unspoken. The air thickens- heavy with words neither say, and a tension that tastes like fire on the back of their tongues. The room holds its breath. James arches a brow, leaning casually against the doorframe like he's in his own flat and not Will's. "So, why the royal decree, then? Commanding me over like I'm your personal puppet master or something?"

Will shrugs, eyes flicking away for a heartbeat before snapping back with that signature sharp edge. "That phone call? Useless. You're better face to face. Way better."

James catches the double meaning, the weight behind the words- the kind that tugs at something deeper. He smirks, the game just starting. "Well, I am pretty irresistible in person."

Will rolls his eyes but can't quite hide the way his lips twitch, betraying that grin fighting to break free. The night's already loaded with electric promises, and neither of them wants to back down.

Will's voice was quieter than usual, the edges dulled like something worn out from being turned over too many times. "I still can't believe it," he said, walking to his kitchen and leaning against the counter. "The way Mikey died… it just doesn't make sense. It was weird. Slipped? Mikey didn't just *slip* ."

James had entered the apartment and shut the door behind him, loosely trailing behind. He let out a short, sharp scoff. "Christ, Will. Maybe stop thinking about Mikey."

The air shifted. Will blinked, his brow furrowing as if he'd misheard. "What?"

James didn't look up. His jaw twitched before he quickly tacked on, smoother this time, "I mean- it'll only make it feel worse. Picking it apart. Imagining all the ways it could've gone differently. That kind of thing… it rots you from the inside."

Will didn't respond straight away. His fingers tapped anxiously against the edge of the countertop. Something in his eyes flickered- uncertainty, maybe. Or suspicion. But then it passed, swallowed down and hidden behind a tired sigh. "Yeah," he muttered. "Maybe."

James moved slowly, like approaching a startled animal. No sudden moves, just the soft press of footsteps against the kitchen tiles. Will didn't look up right away- he was still staring

somewhere past James' shoulder, lost in the dust storm of his own thoughts.

But then James stood right in front of him.

Close. Unapologetically so.

He reached out, carefully, and let his fingers brush against Will's where they drummed the counter. It wasn't bold- just enough. Enough to let Will feel it. To make it clear. A question, disguised as contact. Will glanced down, then finally looked up at him. Their eyes met- blue to something darker- and James, not saying a word, linked their fingers. Just hooked them together like it was nothing. Like it was everything.

Will huffed out a laugh. It wasn't mean, but it wasn't soft either. "Oh my god," he muttered. "You're such a homo."

James gave the smallest smirk, his thumb brushing lazily along the back of Will's hand. "Takes one to know one."

Will rolled his eyes, but didn't pull away. He bumped his knee lightly against James'. "My parents would probably pass out if they saw me standing this close to another man," he teased, voice light, eyes glittering with mischief.

James let out a quiet chuckle- but it faltered. Just a fraction. His fingers tightened around Will's ever so slightly, but his eyes… drifted elsewhere. Somewhere far. Somewhere deep.

His parents.

Oh, they'd be more than shocked. Disgusted, probably. His mother would cross herself like she was warding off evil. His father? God. He'd have said something vile. Thrown something. Thrown *him* , maybe.

They always wanted a son who was strong. Normal. Not this. And suddenly, he thought of her. His sister. The girl who used to sneak him sweets under the table. Who called their father a "bitter goblin" before she disappeared from their lives entirely. God only knows where she was now, but somehow... she *would've* understood. She *would've* smiled at him like he wasn't broken. Like this was okay.

James blinked, pulling himself back into the present, eyes settling on the man in front of him. The man whose fingers were tangled with his own. The man who laughed when he was nervous, who teased to cope, who leaned on the counter like it didn't cost him anything to be touched like this.

Will nudged him again. "Earth to James. You still here or having a midlife crisis at your ripe young age?"

James smirked, low and soft. "Both, probably."

Will grinned. "Well, make sure you crisis in my direction next time. I was enjoying the attention."

James laughed under his breath, eyes still scanning Will's face like he was trying to memorise it. Every line. Every shift in expression. The grin. The sarcasm layered like armour. "You're infuriating," James murmured.

Will just shrugged, cocky. "Takes one to know one."

And James leaned in, ever so slightly. Not enough to alarm. Just enough to change the air. Their hands were still linked. Will hadn't let go.

James tilted his head, watching him. "You always crack jokes when you're uncomfortable?"

Will scoffed, but didn't look away. "Please. I crack jokes when I *am* comfortable too. It's called being well-adjusted."

James didn't blink. "Are you?"

Will's mouth opened, then closed again. A breath caught. Something flickered in his eyes. And for a second, the kitchen felt quieter. Still. Then Will pulled back half a step, his fingers loosening- but not fully letting go. "I don't know," he said. Honest. Quiet. "Maybe."

James' jaw flexed, and he nodded slowly. "Same."

Will studied him for a long moment. "You're thinking something."

"I usually am."

"Wanna say it out loud?"

James shrugged, like it didn't matter. Like it wasn't a stupid little dream clawing inside him. "Just thinking it's kind of fucked up how… how easy this feels. With you."

Will gave him a smile that was more like a sigh. "Yeah," he said. "It kind of is."

The silence fell again- familiar now, like they both knew how to sit inside it. And then Will, voice dry, added, "If you kiss me again, though, I might forget how annoying you are."

James smirked, stepping forward into that half-space that still lingered between them. "Then I guess I better make it count."

Will didn't move. Not away, at least. If anything, he tilted his chin just slightly- the kind of gesture that could be mistaken for defiance if his pupils weren't so dilated. James noticed it. James noticed *everything* . His fingers found Will's again, properly this time. Not the half-hearted linking they'd done moments before, but palms pressed, thumbs grazing knuckles. *Steadying.* Maybe for Will. Maybe for himself.

And then James leaned in.

He didn't go for the lips. Not right away. He hovered. He gave Will the chance to back out, to pull away, to ruin everything with one of his stupid jokes. But Will didn't move. Didn't flinch. He just… waited.

So James tilted his head. Brushed his mouth across Will's- once, soft, like a question.

Will answered it. Their third kiss wasn't soft. It was teeth, and tension, and a noise caught somewhere in Will's throat. James swallowed it gladly. One hand on Will's hip, the other curling behind his neck. He wanted to stay like this. To devour him slowly, reverently.

But Will was the one to break the kiss, breath warm between them. His eyes flicked over James' face like he was seeing something he hadn't quite expected. "You're really fucking weird, you know that?"

James huffed. "You say that like it's news."

Will grinned. "No, I say that like it's annoying."

Then- almost thoughtfully- he added, "But I think I'd be more worried if you were normal."

James quirked a brow. "Why's that?"

Will stepped closer again, until there was nothing but breath and heat and the trembling edge of something new. "Because normal doesn't look at me like you do."

James didn't smile this time. Just nodded, quiet and sure. "No," he said. "They don't."

James' thumb brushed over the back of Will's hand absently, like muscle memory- except there was nothing accidental about the way he lingered there, tracing circles, grounding them both. His voice was low when he finally spoke.

"You didn't answer my question."

Will blinked. "What question?"

"Why you wanted me here. Why you texted me. Or rather, I'm not satisfied with your answer."

Will hesitated. He looked away- not far, just over James' shoulder, like the truth might be easier to tell if it wasn't aimed directly at his face. "…I was going to interrogate you, but now I can't stop thinking about that night."

James tilted his head slightly. "Which part?"

"The part where I wondered- only quickly- if it meant anything to you."

James felt his chest constrict. Not in pain- something worse. Recognition. Guilt. Fear. He'd spent days trying to master every emotion he felt for Will, and now here Will was, dragging them all into the open like it was *casual* .

So he lied. "It didn't."

Will laughed, short and sharp. "Liar."

James looked at him again, properly, and it stung. Will's expression wasn't cruel- it was knowing. A little smug. But mostly: hopeful.

"I didn't want it to," James admitted. "I didn't *plan* for that to happen. But I've never been good at controlling what happens once you're involved."

Will scoffed, shaking his head. "God, you're insufferable."

"Say it again," James said, stepping forward, chest brushing against Will's, voice low. "You love it."

Will didn't argue. His eyes flicked to James' mouth and stayed there. And James- still gripping his hand, still standing too close, still soaked in every inch of Will's attention- smiled, slow and cruel and reverent all at once.

"You wanted a face-to-face conversation?" James murmured, leaning in like a secret. "You should've known I don't only talk with my mouth."

Will just stared at him, breathing harder now. "You're the worst."

"But I'm yours."

That line landed harder than James meant it to. It slipped out before he could weigh the implications. Before he could catch it and pull it back. Will's eyes widened just a fraction, like James had whispered something too real, too raw for the air between them. The words *"But I'm yours"* hung heavy, curling around every nerve in the room.

For a heartbeat, Will looked like he might laugh it off- like it was some cheeky line tossed casually- but then the truth crashed through his smirk. The kind of truth that pins you down and leaves you breathless. His breath hitched. The casual distance between them evaporated, replaced by a magnetic pull so fierce it made the air shimmer. His fingers curled tighter around James', the grip no longer tentative but claiming.

Heat pooled low in James' stomach, rising in a slow, deliberate burn. Will's voice dropped an octave, rougher, huskier. "You *really* know how to make a guy feel wanted."

James grinned, eyes glittering with mischief and something darker- like a storm barely held back. His fingers tightened around Will's wrist, pulling him closer until the scent of leather and musk and something impossibly intimate filled the space between them. Their faces were inches apart now, every shallow breath mingling, every heartbeat loud enough to drown out the world. James's thumb traced slow lazy circles on Will's pulse, stoking the fire beneath the surface. Will's hand slid up James's arm, fingers splaying across warm skin, thumb brushing over the slight flex of muscle beneath the shirt.

Will's lips parted, a ragged inhale escaping, and James could almost taste the wildness beneath that restrained exterior. Will's smirk was a challenge, fingers tangling in James's shirt, nails grazing skin with a touch that was equal parts question and command. James's hand slid lower, tracing the line where shirt met skin, teasing the edge, daring Will to catch fire. Every look, every touch was a conversation louder than words, a slow-burning dare.

Their bodies pressed together, hips nudging, breaths mingling- heartbeats quickening like a countdown. James's voice dropped to a whisper that rumbled deep, "I'm gonna make sure you never forget the way I feel."

Will's laugh was raw, and hungry, and desperate, "Good."

James didn't need permission. He saw it in Will's eyes- the dare, the yes buried under that cocky little smirk. So he stepped in, grabbed Will by the hips, and with one smooth motion hoisted him up onto the counter like he weighed nothing. Will's hands flew to James's shoulders for balance, but he didn't push him away. He pulled him closer. "Jesus," Will muttered, a breathy laugh caught between shock and thrill. "You always this strong?"

James grinned, wicked and slow, like a secret unraveling. "Sure, when I *really* want something."

"Oh yeah?" Will tilted his head, pretending not to be breathless. "And what is it you want, Romeo?"

James leaned in, teeth grazing the shell of his ear, voice like silk dragged over something darker. "To ruin your ability to walk straight tomorrow."

Will barked a laugh, but it caught in his throat when James's hands slid up his thighs, thumbs pressing into muscle like he was mapping out familiar territory. "You're unbelievable."

"And yet," James said, lips brushing Will's jaw, "here you are. Legs wide. On your counter."

Will rolled his eyes- barely- but his fingers twisted in James's shirt, dragging him in. "Fine. Make your move, creepy neighbour."

James didn't need a second invite.

Will was already asleep. James could feel it in the way his breathing had evened out, slow and steady, the faintest whistle catching at the back of his throat like a secret trying not to be heard. His back was pressed against James' chest, spine curved gently into him, like he fit there- like he belonged there. His hair was still damp at the roots, curling a little behind his ears. He'd shifted once or twice before settling, letting James pull him in tighter until there wasn't space for anything else in the world.

James couldn't sleep. Not yet.

His arm rested over Will's waist, hand loose against the flat of his stomach. He could feel the rise and fall, the little twitches of dreaming muscles. And he could smell him, too- shampoo and sweat and something warm that just *was* Will. James lowered his face, brushed his nose along Will's shoulder, gentle.

God, he was beautiful. His body, yes- every inch of it etched into James' memory with startling clarity- but more than that. The way he'd laughed. The way he'd kissed like he meant

it. The way he looked at James like he *saw* him, and didn't immediately look away.

And now, here he was. Soft. Bare. Trusting. Breathing in James' arms like James was safety and not the storm.

James closed his eyes and buried his face in the crook of Will's neck.

He didn't deserve this.

Will stirred, just barely- a faint inhale, a twitch of his shoulders. James felt the shift before he heard it: the weight of Will pressing back into him just a little more, like his body was answering a question his mouth hadn't formed yet. Then, groggily, voice thick with sleep and heavy with warmth, Will mumbled, "You're thinking too loud."

James froze, blinking at the dark room.

Will huffed a lazy breath through his nose, not opening his eyes. "Can feel it. In your hands. The way you're holding me."

James swallowed. His hand had tightened, just slightly, without him noticing. Will always noticed.

"…Sorry," he murmured, but it came out too soft, almost hoarse.

Will shifted again, tilting his head back just enough to angle toward James' cheek. "What is it now, huh? Planning a dramatic monologue while I'm trying to sleep?"

There was no bite in his voice. Just that same weary, amused fondness. James didn't answer right away. He just loosened his hold, then pulled Will closer again- because what the fuck else was he meant to do?

Will hummed at that, satisfied, and mumbled, "Thought so…"

James stared at the ceiling.

Yeah. He was fucked.

Will's breathing evened out for a moment, but then his hand moved, curling lazily around James' forearm like he was holding onto an anchor in deep water. "…Y'didn't answer me," he mumbled, voice slurred at the edges of sleep. "What's rattling in that head of yours?"

James let out a breath through his nose, half-laugh, half-sigh. "You really want to know, or are you just trying to keep me from escaping?"

Will gave a lazy smile. "Little of both."

James' eyes flicked to the soft shape of Will's hair, the curve of his neck against the pillow. He looked like he belonged there. Like a dream James had once, when he believed soft things were meant for other people.

“I was thinking…” James began slowly, voice rough, “how you’ve somehow made this- whatever this is- feel like it’s not going to ruin me.”

Will huffed a low laugh. “Sounds dramatic. Very you.”

Another pause. James smiled faintly into the back of Will’s shoulder. “You’re not scared of me,” he whispered, more to himself than to Will.

James’s words hung in the low light, quiet as the wind brushing against the windows.

You’re not scared of me.

He said it like a confession. Like an apology. Like a warning.

Will just lay there, a soft tangle of limbs and sleep-warm breath. James’ gaze travelled down the slight curve of his cheek against the pillow, the way his hand remained loosely wrapped around James’ forearm. Clinging. Trusting. Stupid.

His body was curled in close, tucked into James like he’d never once considered he might be lying in the arms of something dangerous. That he might be the bird in the fox’s mouth, breathing steady like it didn’t know it had already been caught.

“Should I be?” Will asked after a long beat, voice low and flat. No edge. No fear. Just… something. A flicker of something unreadable. Knowing? Naïve?

James studied him harder. The skin. The breath. The weight.

He wanted to say yes.

He wanted to whisper it against Will’s ear, slow and dangerous: *Yes, you should. You should’ve been scared from the moment you saw me.*

But he didn’t.

Instead, he just stared, heart thudding softly in his chest, his grip tightening- not enough to be noticed. Not yet.

“Go back to sleep,” he murmured instead, lips ghosting over Will’s temple.

And Will did. Like a lamb curled up in the wolf’s den.

James sat on the edge of Will’s sofa, elbows on his knees, hands steepled under his mouth. The apartment was dark, except for the dim, golden spill of a hallway light barely touching the far corners of the living room. It was quiet. The kind of quiet that had teeth. Will was asleep in the other room. James had heard the sighs, the shifting weight, the eventual silence that meant he’d drifted off. His breath had evened out. Peaceful. Vulnerable.

James’ eyes didn’t drift to the door. They were fixed on the bag across the room- his bag. Innocuous to anyone else. Black canvas. Zipped half-open. But to James, it might as well

have been glowing. Inside, buried beneath a hoodie, beneath charger cables, nestled between a notebook and a tin of mints, was everything he needed.

The tiny equipment. The tools. The cameras.

He stared like it was baiting him. Daring him. Calling him.

He didn't move. Not yet. His fingers twitched, resting against his lips. This would be the only time. Will was asleep. Deeply. He wouldn't get another window like this. Not for a while. And something in him- dark, sharp, invasive- knew that if he didn't take it now, he'd regret it.

James moved like a ghost.

Quiet. Methodical. Not rushed, but pulsing with a current of urgency under his skin. His bare feet made no sound against the floor as he crossed the room, eyes flicking briefly toward the dark hallway that led to Will's bedroom. Still asleep.

Good.

He knelt beside the bag, heart pacing like it was keeping time with a second hand somewhere far away. The zip caught slightly as he tugged it down, loud in the silence, and he grimaced, pausing mid-motion. When no shift came from down the hall, he resumed. Under the charger cables, under the hoodie- there.

Three tiny cameras in a velvet pouch. Sleek. Smooth. No bigger than bottle caps. He cradled them in his palm like they were precious stones, holding them up to the soft light and turning them slightly, admiring the discreet lenses. They gleamed with clinical promise.

He'd chosen them carefully. Long battery life. Night vision. High resolution. And, most importantly- completely silent. His fingers tightened around them. The hallway light hummed. No one would notice these. Not unless they were looking for them.

James padded across the living room, the camera a small weight nestled in his palm. The space was dim, scattered with the aftermath of their evening- two mugs on the table, Will's sweatshirt slung over a dining chair, the ghost of laughter still hovering in the air. It felt too warm, too domestic. Like a life that didn't belong to him.

But the bookshelf? That was perfect.

He crouched in front of it, eyes scanning the rows. It was tall, made of walnut-stained wood, stuffed with mismatched books- some alphabetised, some crookedly stacked, others stuffed with receipts and ticket stubs. A photo of Will and Mikey sat on the third shelf. James deliberately didn't look at it.

Instead, he moved for the second shelf- eye level when seated. He chose a cluster of paperbacks, ones he'd watched Will never touch. Carefully, delicately, he slid one out half an inch to create a shadowed recess behind it.

The adhesive clicked softly as he peeled the backing off the camera's mount. Then, in one smooth movement, he pressed it into place- perfectly angled. Watching the room. Watching

everything. He stepped back, slowly, hands loose at his sides. Unnoticeable. Seamless. Just another part of Will's life now.

He moved silently through the flat, the second camera tucked between his fingers. The kitchen was dark, only the under-cabinet light humming a soft glow across the countertops. It smelled faintly of basil and dish soap. So painfully Will. James didn't waste time opening drawers or cupboards that might shift too much. He already knew his target.

Top shelf. Back corner. Those god-awful plates.

He reached up, fingertips brushing the chipped edge of a pale yellow one printed with cartoon lemons and inexplicable cursive writing. *"When life gives you lemons…"* Ugh. He could practically hear Will's voice mocking them. James smirked. Nobody touched these. Not even Will. They were a gift, probably from family; something too guilt-ridden to throw away, too hideous to use. Perfect.

He carefully slid the stack forward just enough to nestle the tiny black eye of the camera into the corner behind it. Angled to catch the entire room. It blinked once, then stilled. Hidden in plain sight. James let out a slow breath.

Two down. One to go.

Then came the hardest part. The bedroom. The sanctum. The place where Will lay sleeping, soft and unguarded. Creepy didn't even begin to cover it. James's mind screamed that he shouldn't be doing this, shouldn't be crossing this line. But he convinced himself- this was better than the bathroom. At least Will would never know, and it gave James the control he craved.

He padded softly toward the door, careful to avoid the creaky floorboard by the hallway. The light from the living room spilled in, casting long shadows. Will's silhouette was peaceful, vulnerable. James swallowed the guilt that threatened to choke him and slid the door open just enough to slip inside, careful not to disturb the quiet rhythm of Will's breathing. Heart pounding, he reached the far corner of the room, pressing the camera into place near the vent where it could watch without being seen. The small click of the latch felt deafening in the silence.

Then he froze, staring at the sleeping figure before him. Part of him wanted to retreat, to run. But another part- dark and desperate- knew this was his way in. His control. His safety net.

He slipped out without a sound. As James eased the bedroom door shut behind him, the soft click echoing far louder in his mind than it did in the quiet apartment, he stood still for a moment- just listening. The hush of the hallway, the distant hum of the fridge, the ghost of Will's breathing on the other side of the wall.

They'd never actually woken up together.

That thought hit him in the ribs- low and sharp. Not once. Not like couples did in films or fairytales. No early-morning kisses, no sleepy smiles, no tangled limbs in sunlit sheets. Like an unspoken rule had been drawn across the bed. A boundary.

He’d never asked about it.

And Will had never offered.

Was it guilt? Or control? Or just... Will being Will?

James stared at the wall for a long second, eyes tracing the distance between where he stood and where Will lay, only separated by drywall and dread. He pressed a palm flat against the wall, thumb brushing the smooth paint.

A boundary. Or a barrier.

And yet- he’d just crossed a line Will never even knew was drawn.

III

James sat cross-legged on the floor of his apartment like some fucked-up monk mid-exorcism.

The glow from his monitors painted him in shades of sickly blue. Otto was asleep in the armchair behind him, tail flicking now and then, like even the cat was irritated with him. The soda can in James' hand had long since gone flat, lukewarm like the tension buzzing in his skin.

Then he did it again. Softly. Under his breath. Barely more than a whisper.

"So, Will... how long have you known?"

Silence answered him, but he tilted his head like he'd just heard the beginning of a reply.

"You figured it out before the bar, didn't you?"

"That smile. That... fucking smile. You *knew* , didn't you?"

His eyes snapped to the screen. Frame frozen on Will's face. That smirk. That unholy, calm-as-hell smirk aimed directly into the camera lens like he'd planned it.

James chuckled bitterly and dropped his forehead into his palm. He was shaking. He didn't even realise.

"Why didn't you say anything, huh? Why're you playing *my* game now?"

He sat silently for a brief moment. Then a new voice, one he conjured in his head- *Will's* , but butchered slightly. Too kind. Too honest. Not real at all.

"Because I wanted you to tell me, James."

That made him laugh. Sharp. Short. Ugly.

"Tell you? What, during dinner? In between bites of overcooked penne? 'By the way, I've been watching you sleep for weeks, hope that's not weird.'"

He changed the voice again. Made it accusatory this time.

"You're sick."

"No," James snapped back, out loud, to no one. "I'm *in love* ."

It echoed in the room like a gunshot. His voice. His confession. It bounced off the walls and smacked him right in the face. He fell quiet. Completely still. Then he tried again.

“If I tell you everything... will you still stay?”

And in the silence that followed, James nodded to himself like Will had answered. As if he *would* . As if he *could* . He whispered, “Thought not.”, and pressed play. The camera feed resumed.

Will’s smirk looped again.

IIII

James watched Will's fingers drum against the kitchen island. Light, lazy taps. No rhythm, just noise. They both sat perched on the stools like nothing was wrong- like one of them hadn't stared down a camera lens and shattered everything. The kitchen was dimly lit, low orange hue from the under-cabinet strip lights. Outside, the city glowed behind rain-glossed windows. It wasn't abnormal for them to visit each other. In fact, it had become beautifully regular.

Will sipped his drink- just water, tonight. He hadn't said why. James hadn't asked. There was an invisible thread between them now, taut and humming. Every sentence they exchanged felt like it carried a second meaning.

"You've rearranged," Will said suddenly, nodding toward the countertop clutter. His voice was casual, almost bored.

James frowned. "No, I haven't."

Will just smiled faintly and lifted the salt shaker. He moved it three inches to the left. "You sure? Maybe you just forgot where things go."

James' eyes flicked to the shaker. Then back to Will. "Maybe."

Will's smile didn't reach his eyes. He took another sip. Let his fingers trace over the cool marble. "You're usually tidier."

James wanted to say something biting, something clever- but something about the way Will kept moving small things- his mug, a spoon, now the corner of the placemat- kept derailing his thoughts. It was deliberate. Like Will was testing something.

Or someone.

And James hated how unsure it made him feel, in his own flat.

James flicked that smile on like a switch- sharp, practiced, the kind that says *I got this* even when his insides are screaming. He leans back on the kitchen island stool, fingers tapping the granite like it's some kind of metronome trying to steady his rattled heart.

"Yeah, Will, I usually am," he says, voice smooth but just a shade too light, the one they always used to share when the air was thick but they wanted to pretend it wasn't. "But you know me. Always overthinking, making mountains out of molehills." His eyes flick to Will's, searching- no, begging- for that flicker of old comfort, that quiet anchor in the storm.

Behind the smile, his mind's spinning a million miles a minute, but hell, he's not about to let Will see the cracks just yet. Not now. Not when things are already so tangled. Will's eyes flick down to the countertop, casually nudging that ceramic salt shaker again- just enough to shift it an inch. Not a big move, but enough. Subtle sabotage.

Will watches James out of the corner of his eye, that tiny smirk teasing at the corner of his lips like he's enjoying this little mental game. The silence stretches for a beat too long, heavy with unspoken monologues, before Will finally breaks it.

"So," Will says, "how *are* you, really?"

James reached out slowly, his fingers barely brushing the cold ceramic of the salt shaker. His smile tightened. He glanced up at Will, voice low and smooth, "I'm doing well enough."

James' eyes flicked to the salt shaker, now resting off-center on the counter. A small twitch of his jaw, barely noticeable, but enough to show the freeze beneath his calm facade. His fingers, cool and precise, moved over and slid the shaker back to its exact original spot- aligned perfectly with the pepper grinder beside it, like it belonged there and nowhere else.

Will watched that, eyes glinting with something sharp, almost predatory, like he *knew* exactly what he was doing- testing the boundaries of James' control, poking at the invisible lines James never dared cross.

"You really gonna fix that every time, or should I just keep moving things?" Will said, voice smooth but loaded, like a chess player making a sly move on the board.

James said nothing. Just a tight nod. The silence was thick enough to suffocate, but the message was clear: in this apartment, control was king- and Will had just made a bold, deliberate *power* play. James didn't reply right away. Instead, he took a slow breath, like savoring the tension thickening the air between them. His eyes locked onto Will's, calm but ice-cold, calculating.

"Move one thing," James said finally, voice low but razor-sharp, "and I'll move you right back out my flat."

Will's smirk flickered, amused but cautious now. They didn't live together- in fact they barely went to James' apartment anymore. He leaned back on the kitchen island stool, legs stretching out just enough to claim his space, but not enough to look careless. "Big words," Will said, "for someone who's so damn good at hiding behind a smile."

James shrugged, almost lazy in the motion, but his gaze never wavered. "You've seen what's underneath."

Will laughed softly, the sound light but tense, like a razor cutting silk. "Oh, I've seen plenty. But you know what? Sometimes the mask is more interesting than the face."

James reached out, fingers twitching as if he wanted to touch Will, to pull him into his orbit or push him away- still undecided which. But the moment hung suspended, fragile as glass.

"Try me," James whispered.

Will's eyes darkened, the room shrinking down to just the two of them, and for a heartbeat, everything else vanished- the salt shaker, the kitchen, the carefully kept control- until it was just raw, pulsing energy crackling between them.

Will's smirk deepened, eyes glinting with that maddening mix of mischief and challenge. He leaned forward just enough, voice smooth and teasing. "You're acting like I know something, James. Like I'm sitting on some big secret you're dying to spill."

James's jaw tightened, but he kept the smile pinned on- sharp and unreadable. "Maybe you are. Or maybe I'm just waiting for you to admit what's already staring me in the face."

Will's laugh was low, but it didn't reach his eyes. "You're paranoid. Classic James move."

But beneath the banter, something unsaid twisted tighter between them, heavier than the air they breathed.

James narrowed his eyes, the faint smile faltering just a bit as he studied Will's casual deflection. "Seriously though," James said, voice low and sharp, "we've been in bed together. Had our fun, no masks. So what's with this... shift? You're acting like you don't even know me. Like you're playing some game I don't get."

He let the question hang, heavy and accusing. Because damn, it wasn't like Will to be this cagey. Not after everything. Will's smirk twitched, caught somewhere between amusement and something else- something colder. "Maybe I'm just testing the waters. Seeing if you're as unpredictable as you seem."

James didn't buy it for a second. Not from him. Not now.

Otto had always been selective with his affection- a creature of aloof dignity. Even James, his so-called "owner," had to earn it. Which is why, when the fox-faced little feline strutted across the kitchen tiles and hopped with ease onto Will's lap- James felt his stomach twist.

Will laughed quietly, rubbing just beneath Otto's chin, and the cat responded by leaning in, tucking his little head under Will's jaw in that trusting way cats rarely offer. It was soft. Sweet. Sickening. The way the cat's body softened. The way his tail wrapped around Will's wrist. That wasn't just trust. That was loyalty. That was possession. Otto never acted like this. Not even with James, unless James was alone, quiet, unguarded. And now this smug bastard had Otto melting into his touch like they'd known each other their whole lives?

No.

His tongue felt dry behind his teeth.

Maybe Otto knew something. Animals had instincts, didn't they? They felt shifts in the air. In people. In their intentions. And right now, Otto was betraying him. Worse: Otto was choosing. James shifted his weight, forcing a tight smile.

"Traitor," he murmured under his breath, just loud enough for Otto to flick an ear.

Will left quietly.

No kiss goodbye, no knowing look. Just the soft click of the front door behind him, muffled by the lingering scent of him in the flat- like citrus and something warmer. James sat still for a moment, perched on the edge of the barstool like a man waiting to wake up. He didn't.

Instead, he turned slowly toward the center of the room where Otto had flopped lazily onto the rug under the sink, licking a paw with casual disinterest.

"You're horrid, you know that?" James muttered.

Otto didn't look up.

James rose, the wood creaking beneath him. His eyes were dark and sharp, tracking Otto's every movement as though the cat might suddenly confess all. He moved across the room and crouched in front of the animal, one hand steady as he reached forward- not to stroke him, not quite. Just to observe.

"You like him, don't you?" he whispered. "You little... turncoat. One whiff of his hand and you were his."

Otto's tail flicked once. James narrowed his eyes.

He stood up, pacing.

There was something off about the way Otto had responded today. The way he'd curled against Will. The way he'd looked up with soft, trusting eyes. James had never seen the cat do that- not even with him. Otto was aloof, reserved, his affection hard-won and fleeting. But with Will? It was like he'd... submitted.

Or worse; chosen.

James drifted toward the counter, arms folded across his chest, gnawing at the inside of his cheek. His eyes flitted to the empty spot on the stool where Will had been sitting just moments ago, laughing- God, laughing- like he had nothing to hide. Had Otto sensed something about him? Was that why the cat had leaned in, nudged his head beneath Will's jaw like that?

He pivoted back toward Otto.

"Let's test that, shall we?"

His voice was sharp now, coaxing the edges of obsession.

James moved quickly to the kitchen, snatching the glass Will had used- half-drunk water, faint lip marks still on the rim. He placed it carefully in the center of the floor, crouched beside it, and waited.

Otto blinked.

“Go on,” James said. “Go to it. Let’s see who you’re loyal to.”

The cat remained still.

James’ jaw ticked.

He stood again, fetched the sweatshirt Will had left on the back of the chair. The grey one, with the stretched collar. James held it up, sniffed it without shame, then laid it across the counter where Will had sat next to.

Again, he waited.

Otto approached. Slowly. Then, delicately, he leapt onto the counter and curled into the hollow of the sweatshirt, purring faintly as he kneaded the fabric beneath his paws. It was confirmation. James felt the air leave his lungs in a quiet exhale. His vision darkened at the edges. “You think he’s safer, don’t you?” His voice cracked now. “You think he’s... real. Honest. Kind.”

His fingers curled into fists. “But he’s not. He’s not. He’s watching me.”

The purring grew louder.

“Of course you don’t get it. You’re a cat. But maybe even you can see it- the way he looks at me now. The questions in his eyes. The weight in his voice. He knows. And you-”

Otto rolled onto his back, still nestled in Will’s sweater, exposing his belly.

James stared. “What are you trying to tell me?” he whispered. “Is that surrender? Or are you mocking me?”

Otto blinked upside-down, blank and innocent. The line between the kitchen and his spiraling thoughts blurred. Maybe Otto had been his once. Maybe he’d watched through the windows, from James’ lap, tail flicking in sync with the beat of his obsessions. But something was shifting. James could feel it. Otto was changing sides. Or being lured. Or manipulated.

Will had taken his cat.

That was a power play.

That was war.

James sat on the floor, legs drawn up, back against the cabinet beneath the kitchen window. The glass Will had used sat abandoned on the floor. The scent had faded. Otto was gone- slinked off somewhere to nap, or maybe just tired of being watched.

James couldn’t remember when his hands started shaking.

It was the silence that did it. Silence, and the knowledge that he was alone in it. He stared down at his palms. Trembling. Damp. Cold. Like they didn't belong to him. His breath had gone shallow- chest rising too fast, too often, like the room was thinning around him. He tried to take in a deeper breath and it caught halfway through, splintered across his ribs like a broken ladder.

He couldn't get air. Not properly.

Fuck.

He clenched his fists, like he could wring control out of his own body, force it back into obedience. But his heart was hammering- too loud, too fast. It drowned out the quiet. It roared like guilt. It felt like guilt. The glass. The sweater. The way Otto had curled into it without hesitation. Will's mouth moving on that camera feed.

His head cracked against the cabinet as he let it fall back, hard. He welcomed the pain. It anchored him- briefly. Gave his mind something concrete to hold. Something that wasn't imagined, or remembered, or horrifyingly real.

It wasn't real. It couldn't be. Will didn't know. But what if he did?

James pressed the heel of his palms into his eyes, hard enough to see stars. He rocked forward on the floor, forehead to knees. Breathing like a drowning man. That was what this was- drowning. The feeling of going under and never quite surfacing.

Everything in the apartment was *wrong* . Too still. Too sterile. The air smelled like lemon cleaning spray and sweat and leftover fear.

And the cameras.

He turned his head slowly toward the hallway, leading to his office which held the monitors, all dim now in sleep mode. But they were there. Waiting. Always waiting. Just a flicker of movement from Will's flat and they'd come alive again, glowing with silent, complicit light.

He couldn't look at them. He couldn't *not* look at them.

Because what if Will was there now? Standing still in the hallway again. Smiling. What if he had always known? What if *everyone* had always known?

James clawed at his own chest, fingers digging into the fabric of his shirt like he could unpick the panic from beneath his skin. His breath caught again, a ragged inhale that felt more like a sob. He hadn't meant for it to get this far. He hadn't meant for *any* of it.

Just a crush. Just curiosity. Just observation. And then- something more. Something consuming. Something violent. Like love, if love was diseased. If love hollowed you out and made a home of your worst instincts. He pressed his hands to the floor. Cold tile. Real. "I'm fine," he whispered. "I'm *fine* ."

The word tasted like blood and denial. But he said it again. Again. Each repetition a beat against the chaos.

Eventually- after minutes, maybe more- the tremors began to slow. The shaking in his hands dulled to a faint pulse. The breath began to stick less, rise easier. He was still curled on the floor, but upright now. His head hung between his shoulders, strands of hair plastered to his damp forehead.

He couldn’t look at the monitors. Not now. Not until the smile stopped burning behind his eyelids like a brand.

James had locked the door five times. He knew it. He watched himself do it- one bolt, two, the chain, the deadlock, the rusted auxiliary at the bottom. But his hand still gripped the knob, twisting it uselessly, tugging it again. Locked. Of course it was. Still, he tried it one more time.

He stepped back. Turned. Then twisted again.

He was aware of how pathetic it looked. How manic. Otto sat across the room on the windowsill, his tail curled neatly, amber eyes following James’ movements like he was trying to decode a threat.

"You're judging me too, huh?" James muttered, voice hoarse with disuse. "Join the queue."

No reply, obviously. Just the quiet creak of the building settling and the low hum of the fridge. It was dark outside. The kind of dark that smothered the streetlights and made the windows black mirrors. James could see himself in the reflection, a distorted outline in the warped glass, something human-adjacent but not quite real.

He’d stopped sleeping. Eating, sporadically. Whatever scraps were nearby. The camera feeds played in their ever-looping cycle on his wall of monitors- Will brushing his teeth whilst making his bed, Will cooking pasta, Will walking through his flat and glancing toward the window like he knew something.

He hadn’t spoken to Will since the last time.

God, that fucking smile.

He turned away from the door and paced back toward his monitors. Each footstep echoed like a gunshot in the empty flat. His socks scuffed over the wood floor. He reached the desk and gripped the edge so tightly his knuckles whitened. The skin over them was raw, bitten. Nails chewed down to crescent moons. He’d stopped noticing the pain days ago.

A single monitor flickered.

Will was home. James didn’t need the time stamp. He knew his patterns. This was his usual time- Wednesday, 8:36PM. Pasta night. Thursdays were takeout. Fridays were pub quizzes. He lived like a metronome. Predictable. Comforting. Until now.

Will stood in his kitchen, back to the camera. Boiling water. Tossing spaghetti into a pot.

James stared. Motionless. He didn't even know what he was waiting for anymore. A look? A word? Another smirk?

A crack.

Maybe.

God, he felt like he was going to crawl out of his own skin. The inside of his chest itched. Not physically, but existentially. Something clawed at his ribs like it wanted out. It was getting harder to tell if it was guilt, fear, or just… the inevitability of it all. A slow leak of sanity. A drip-feed of unraveling.

He slid to the floor. Literally- like his knees gave way all at once. His spine hit the bookshelf edge behind him and he didn't even flinch. His breath stuttered. Otto made a soft sound from the window, a low meow like a question. James turned his head. "Still here, huh?" he whispered.

The cat blinked.

He pressed his palms to his cheeks. Hard. Like if he could push hard enough, he'd reset something. Flush out the rot in his skull. The thoughts. The obsessive loops. The memory of Mikey's blood on his sleeve.

No.

Don't think about that.

"He just… slipped?"

James let out a laugh that didn't sound like laughter. More like a wheeze. A burst of air through a cracked dam.

"Yeah," he said aloud to no one. "He slipped."

The silence after that was obscene. Deafening. The kind of silence that felt like a threat. Like it was listening. He dropped his hands and stared forward. The lights from the monitors played against the pale skin of his arms, casting long, thin shadows across his floor. He could still feel Will's weight in his bed. His scent on the pillow. The warmth of his skin, the softness of his voice when he mumbled through sleep. For a brief window in time, it had all felt… right. But of course it didn't last.

Because James didn't get things like that. James got echoes. He got smirks through cameras and foxes sinking in lakes. He got the blood on his knuckles and the trembling hands and the look on Will's face when he said "Stop thinking about Mikey."

God, what had he done?

He bent forward and got on his knees, pressing his forehead to the floor. The wood was cold.

Grounding.

Real.

He stayed like that for a while- minutes, hours, it didn't matter- until his body began to tremble with something close to weeping, but not quite. The tears wouldn't come. Maybe they were stuck. Maybe he didn't deserve them.

Above him, the monitors flickered.

Will stirred in his flat across the road, unaware, or maybe very aware, of the man who'd come undone entirely just to be close to him. The man who loved him so hard it made him monstrous.

James moved- silent, jerky, and dangerous. The light from the monitors flickered against the walls, but he didn't glance back at them. He stalked to his desk, the room thick with the smell of rain and something older, something soured.

His hand snapped out. The notebook sat waiting- black leather, soft at the edges from overuse. He grabbed it by the spine, yanked it open so hard that a few loose sketches fluttered out like dead leaves. Pages flew past under his thumb- quick flashes of Will in pencil and charcoal. Will with his hand in his hair. Will laughing, smirking, sleeping. Hundreds of poses, all rendered like worship. And then-

A blank page.

He stopped.

His breath caught in his throat as if even it didn't want to be here anymore. The pen he kept wedged between pages clattered to the desk, then his fingers snatched it up like it had offended him.

No more watching. No more waiting. Just this. Just *truth* .

James pressed the pen to the paper. And wrote: *Where did I go wrong?*

And then the rest spilled out- fast, messy, ugly. Like blood from a wound he had no intention of dressing.

Where did I go wrong?

No, really- when was the exact moment? Was it the second I saw him across the courtyard, sunshine bleeding over his stupid hair, when he didn't even glance up? Was it when he smiled at me in that café like I wasn't a ticking thing? Or was it back when I was still a boy, still shivering next to lakes and fox corpses, learning that affection meant looking away?

I keep tracing it back like a line on glass. Every crack leads somewhere else, but they all end up fracturing me.

I told myself this was connection. I told myself this was love- or if not love, at least need. Human need. But it's not human, is it? There's something else in me, something that watches instead of touches, catalogues instead of comforts. Something that doesn't ask permission. I

thought I could contain it, turn it into devotion. Shape it into something tender. But it always bleeds through. It always stinks of rot.

Was it when I put the camera in his bedroom? Or when I convinced myself it was protection? When I whispered, "Just in case," like it made it okay?

No. It wasn't a moment. It was every single one. Every second I chose to stay silent instead of honest. Every time I smiled instead of begged him to see me. Because if he really saw me- God, if he really knew- he would've walked away ages ago.

Maybe he did know. Maybe he was never fooled.

Maybe I was just the only one pretending.

And now I sit here, in the mess I made, staring at doorways that won't open and phones that won't ring, wondering if this is what love is. Or if it's just one more name I gave my own undoing.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so let's address the elephant in the room. What the hell was the fox thing, and why did it have to die like THAT.

Foxes are cunning, quiet, observant, often misunderstood little creatures. They don't bark for help. they survive by staying unseen. And that's baby James to a T. I think he's an intelligent, sensitive, soft-footed little soul living in a house where noise = danger. The fox doesn't just represent childhood innocence, it represents the specific way James learned to navigate pain: by staying clever, silent, and unnoticed. But obviously he noticed everything. So when James finds that fox- hurt, vulnerable, bleeding- it's a mirror. Or at least, I hoped it would be. A pathetic, wounded version of himself. Something he can care for, because no one is caring for him. And for a brief moment, it becomes a symbol of hope. Of compassion. Of "maybe I'm not a monster because I can love something small and fragile."

Which, of course, is why it has to die.

Ahhh but you're so mean, why did the father have to kill it!! Quite simple once again, my friends. Because in the world James grew up in, love is weakness and weakness is punishable. His father, an authoritarian, abusive, insecure excuse for a man, recognises the fox as something tender. And he's disgusted. He sees James' bond with it and does what abusers always do: he finds the softest part of his victim and crushes it. He doesn't just snap its neck (because wouldn't that be too obvious?) he throws it into the water. Violent. Cold. Humiliating. The method matters. Drowning is slow and powerless. It's not instant. It's a twisted display of dominance, forcing James to watch something he loves die in a way that he can't stop. This isn't just punishment for "taking in a wild animal." It's punishment for feeling. For loving. For thinking there's space in this world

for anything gentle. It's the father saying: "You want to be soft? I'll show you what the world does to soft things."

I'm sorry lovelies, I just wanted to create something impactful which would truly demonstrate the harsh upbringing James had and why he is how he is now.

Now let's talk about when James uses sex not just to distract Will, but to possess him. Mikey represents everything James can't be: normal, safe, emotionally accessible. And that threatens him. So what does James do? He weaponises the one thing he knows Will can't resist: intimacy with him. But it's not really about closeness. It's about disruption. He needs Will to forget Mikey exists, even for a second. He needs Will's mind on him, his body on him, his heart- if it dares to flutter- to be tangled up in him.

James putting cameras in Will's house isn't just a violation. It's the first domino in his inevitable collapse. It marks the moment his obsession mutates into full-blown paranoia, when love twists into surveillance and trust becomes impossible. He tells himself it's safety, connection, even care, but really, it's fear rotting his logic from the inside out. Every frame he watches plants doubt, every moment he records makes him spiral deeper. This isn't control, it's the illusion of it, and it's crumbling. From this point on, James isn't just watching Will. He's watching the slow, inescapable disintegration of himself.

Will's smirk at the camera is a seismic shift; the hunted finally looking back at the hunter. It's quiet, almost nothing, but to James, it's earth-shattering. That single smirk says: I know.

James talking to himself is the clearest symptom of the breakdown he's been spiralling toward since the cameras went in. It's the moment the walls close in and there's no one left to manipulate, no one left to gaslight except himself. His obsession has consumed every real connection, and now he fills the silence with fragments of his own fractured mind. It's not reflection. It's not processing. It's desperation, clawing for control in a world that no longer responds to him. This is the inevitable decline: when the voyeur becomes the deluded narrator of his own unraveling. Talking to himself because no one's listening.

Part 4 is a fractured, feverish patchwork, James' mind splintering in real time. It reads like a metaphorical dying: not of the body, but of the self. Each section, each jagged moment, is a shard of the identity he once clung to- lover, observer, controller- being ripped apart and stitched together into something unrecognisable. The narrative structure mirrors his psyche: chaotic, paranoid, unstable. There's no through-line, no clean logic- just looping thoughts, shifting realities, and desperate attempts to grasp something real before it disappears.

Chapter 10 is going to be the longest and final chapter. The decline is real, and oh I cannot wait to write it. Sorry for the sheer amount of analysis on this chapter, I just felt as if it was necessary.

raison d'être

Chapter Summary

I: 'Revenge' - XXXTENTACION
II: 'The Great Gig in the Sky' - Pink Floyd
III: 'Mortal Projections' - Djo
IIII: 'Beanie' - Chezile
IIIII: 'Golden' - Riley Baron
Epilogue: 'Two Birds' - Regina Spektor

Others:
'Feel Anything' - Nxdia
'Devil in Disguise' - Marino
'You're So Vain' - Carly Simon

Chapter Notes

The last chapter. Monumentally terrifying. A bit long, this one. But enjoy, my lovelies.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I

His teenage years. The late afternoon sun smeared itself against the curtains, a thick amber haze that cut through the dust in James' room. He was fifteen. Legs crossed on the edge of his bed, back propped against the wall, and his sketchbook balanced against his knees like a fragile piece of armor. The graphite smudged his fingertips, grey and ghostlike. He hadn't realized how hard he was pressing until his pencil broke, the lead snapping with a quiet pop that echoed too loud in the silence. Outside, the house creaked- old wood and older arguments still settling in the walls. His door was closed, not locked. He never locked it. That only made things worse.

A knock. Soft. Fingertip-gentle. Not his father's.

James tensed, clutching the sketchbook a little tighter, not looking up. His sister's voice was soft- older than it had been when they used to whisper late at night about monsters under the bed. Now she only whispered about real ones.

"Jim?" came the voice- familiar, older, quieter than it used to be. His sister. Not urgent. Not apologetic. Just… present. She waited. He kept his eyes on the drawing. A tree bending in the wind. He hadn't added the figure beneath it yet- the one he knew he'd place there, crouched small at its roots.

The door creaked. Another knock. "You decent?"

Still no answer. But he didn't say no. The door opened a crack, then more. Her head poked through- messy hair, tired eyes, and that cautious expression she wore around broken things. She walked in slowly, like she wasn't sure if this was a battlefield or a bedroom. It was both. James didn't look at her. Just adjusted his knee and kept drawing. There was a bruise blooming under his eye- black and purple and ugly- and neither of them mentioned it. Not yet.

"You're not asleep, are you?"

James didn't look up. He didn't answer right away. He dragged the pencil across the page with its broken lead- a crooked line down the spine of a half-finished face. The subject's eyes were too big. Their mouth, too quiet.

He muttered quietly, "What do you think?" with a roll of his eyes that spoke of years of put-up-with-it.

A sharp tut sliced through the silence. "Honestly, Jamie. Could you be any more annoying?"

He dragged his gaze up from the notebook pressed to his knees, finally meeting her eyes at the bottom of his bed. She stood there, arms crossed, the faintest smirk playing on her lips. Unharmed. Untouched.

Not that their dad would ever lay a hand on her.

That thought lingered, bitter and sharp, like a cracked shard of glass buried under the surface. James' fingers still traced the jagged lines of his sketch. "You actually need something, or you just here to piss me off?" His voice was low, clipped- half bored, half defensive.

She eased herself onto the edge of his bed, legs dangling. "Maybe a bit of both," she said, arching an eyebrow.

James rolled his eyes but didn't stop drawing. "Yeah, right."

She watched him for a moment, like she was weighing whether to speak or just sit in the silence with him. She studied him for a moment, eyes flicking over the dark bruises shadowing his cheek and the tight line of his jaw. Like she was trying to read something deeper beneath the quiet mess he'd built around himself.

James caught her gaze briefly, then dragged his eyes back down to the sketchpad, fingers tightening on the pencil. He didn't want to give her anything to hold onto.

She shifted closer, voice dropping low, like she was sharing a secret only the walls should hear. "So," she started, careful, "how's the therapy going? You been… talking about things?"

Her tone wasn't pushy, but gentle- like she was dipping a toe into cold water, hoping he wouldn't pull away. James didn't even bother looking up this time. His pencil kept scratching the page, sharp and restless. "Dad only put me in therapy 'cause he thinks I'm crazy," he spat bitterly, voice low but heavy with all the years of bruises he'd swallowed. "Like I'm the problem or something."

He paused, then muttered, "Not like it's about fixing anything."

His sister sighed, the sound soft but steady, like she was trying to balance something fragile between them. "You're weird, James. Always have been," she said quietly, perching on the edge of his bed. "But not crazy. Not in the way Dad thinks. You just… see things differently. That's all."

Her eyes held a flicker of something like understanding, a rare warmth in his teenage years that made the air between them shift just a little. James finally let his pencil rest, the scratchy sound fading as he set the sketchpad down on his lap. He rubbed the back of his neck, eyes drifting to the ceiling like searching for a truth he couldn't quite find.

"I don't even know what to say in those sessions," he muttered, voice low and rough. "It's like… they want me to spill everything, but I'm not sure *what* to spill. It's all just… noise in my head."

He glanced back at his sister, a flicker of vulnerability slipping through the usual wall of sarcasm. "Maybe that's why Dad thinks I'm crazy. Because I don't make sense. Even to myself."

She grimaced, biting her lip like she wanted to say something but wasn't sure how. The room thickened with this weird, silent awkwardness- like the air was holding its breath, waiting.

But then her eyes softened, and she gave a small nod. “I get it,” she said quietly. “It’s not easy putting your guts out there. Doesn’t mean you’re broken.”

She glanced away for a second, then back at him. “You’re just… odd. But that’s fine, James.”

James shot her a sharp look, lips tightening into a snarl. “Stop saying I’m odd,” he snapped, voice low and rough like gravel underfoot. “I’m not some sideshow to be poked at and whispered about.” He shoved the sketchpad away like it’d bitten him and glared, daring her to argue. “Weird, odd- same shit. Just stop.”

She opened her mouth, trying to cut him off, but James was already sitting up straighter, eyes sharp and cold. “You’re turning into them, you know,” he said, voice dripping with venom. “Mum and Dad- always judging, always waiting to pounce. I thought you were better than that.”

The room felt heavier, like the air itself was thick with all the things left unsaid. Her lips pressed tight, jaw trembling just enough to betray her calm. Her fingers twisted nervously in the hem of her shirt, and her eyes- those bright, sharp eyes he always admired- started to glaze over, as if the fight was draining out of her. James caught the shift immediately, the subtle tightening around her mouth, the quick inhale she tried to hide. Guilt gnawed at him like a cold shadow creeping across the room, and for a moment, his own anger faltered beneath the weight of seeing her break. James swallowed hard, the bitterness in his throat suddenly tasting sour. His voice softened, quieter than before. “Sorry... I didn’t mean to snap. I just... I don’t want to be treated like some freak.” He glanced at her, really looked- trying to bridge the distance his words had carved. “I’m sorry, okay?”

Her eyes welled up, a quiet tremble in her lip betraying the steady voice she tried to keep. “It’s just... it’s been hard, you know? All my life, having a brother like you. Not in a bad way- I mean, it’s tough trying to protect you, to make sure you’re okay in this house. And then to see you so... lost.”

She blinked quickly, trying to blink the tears back, but they clung stubbornly. “I don’t know how to fix it, James. I really don’t.”

James shifted awkwardly on the bed, the rough fabric of his jeans scraping against the worn sheets. He edged forward, half unsure how to bridge the sudden quiet that settled between them. His voice came low, hesitant, “Hey... it’s not your fault. You’ve done plenty.”

He reached out, fingers barely brushing her arm in a clumsy attempt at comfort, like a lifeline thrown into unfamiliar waters. “I know it’s hard. For both of us.”

She scoffed softly, shaking her head as if dismissing his words, but then her eyes flicked down to the darkening bruise blossoming across his cheekbone. Her hand moved almost involuntarily, gesturing toward the swelling.

“That,” she said quietly, voice rough with something like regret, “is something I *definitely* couldn’t protect you from.”

Her glance was sharp but held no blame- just a painful acknowledgment of how little she could do. She let out a bitter laugh, eyes narrowing as she glanced around the cramped room, the peeling wallpaper, the stale air that always seemed to linger.

“I hate this house,” she said low, voice thick with resentment. “It’s like a trap- walls that watch, silence that screams, and nowhere to run. It’s why none of this feels real.” Her words hung heavy, a shared weight between them, a poison both had been forced to swallow.

James opened his mouth, about to mutter something- an excuse, a retort- but she cut him off before the words could form.

“And now you’re even in therapy,” she said, voice sharp like a cracked whip. “How’s Dad even paying for that? After all the beer he drains every night like it’s his lifeline? Makes me wonder if he even cares or if this whole thing’s just another joke to him.”

Her eyes flashed with bitter truth, and James felt that familiar stab in his chest- the ache of being invisible, expendable.

James forced a small, steadying breath, trying to reel her back from the edge of that dark place she’d drifted into. “Hey, it’s gonna be okay. We’ll figure it out- maybe I’ll get better, and Dad... well, maybe he’ll change.”

But she shook her head, the weight of reality settling like a stone in her eyes. “I’m going to university,” she said softly, almost like confessing a sin. “I’m leaving this place. And I don’t know when I’ll be back.”

The words hit James like a fist to the gut, the ground beneath him cracking open. Her leaving wasn’t just a goodbye- it was a fracture, a quiet shattering of whatever fragile hope he’d been clutching. For the first time, the room felt impossibly empty, and the silence screamed louder than any argument. She gave a tired little shrug, wiping at her eyes quickly before forcing a half-smile. “You’re already in grammar school, James. You’ll be off to university in a few years. It won’t be that bad- not like you’re stuck here forever.”

Her words were meant to soothe, but all they did was stir the ache deeper inside him. Like a countdown ticking away, each step pulling them further apart- her out into the world, him still trapped in this mess. Yet, somehow, hearing it said aloud made it all feel painfully real.

James’s fingers drifted to his cheekbone, brushing the edge of the bruise like he wasn’t fully aware he was doing it. It throbbed dully under his touch- an ugly bloom of colour he hadn’t bothered to ice.

And suddenly, it hit him.

If she left… there’d be no one between him and the next blow. No one to tell their dad to back off, to shout, to block a door, to lie and say James wasn’t home. Without her, the house would be all creaking floorboards and slammed doors and fists that never missed their mark.

He swallowed thickly. The silence felt heavier than her words ever could.

“I’m happy for you,” James said, and it tasted like rust in his mouth. He forced a smile, paper-thin, and let it hang between them like a crooked picture frame.

His voice didn’t crack. He made sure of it. He didn’t blink either, didn’t shift his posture- just sat there with that faint smile, a trained reflex after years of dodging questions and bruises alike. Because of course he was happy. Right? Of course he wanted her to get out, to run, to leave behind the cracked walls and the sour stink of beer and his own broken rhythms. She deserved that. A clean break. A future. Freedom. But still… the word “happy” echoed in his head like it didn’t belong to him.

She tilted her head, eyes narrowing just slightly- just enough to cut through the air like a knife. “Are you?” she asked, soft but blunt. No real bite to it, but no sugar either.

James didn’t respond. He blinked once, slow. His fingers tapped a restless beat against the spine of his sketchbook, but he didn’t meet her eyes.

“I know you,” she added, quieter now, like she was afraid of puncturing something delicate between them. “You say things you don’t mean when you think it’ll make it easier for me.”

That made him glance at her, and for a second he resented how well she could read him- how she always had. Even when they were younger. Especially then.

“Don’t do that,” she said, sitting up straighter on the bed. “Don’t lie to me just because you think I need protecting.”

James scoffed under his breath, but it was hollow. No heat. Just something to fill the space.

“I don’t need protecting,” she finished, “Not from your feelings.”

James let out a slow, dry laugh- one of those brittle ones that cracked at the edges before it even reached his throat. His fingers found the sketchbook, thumb brushing the edge of a dog-eared page. “Everyone needs protecting from my feelings,” he muttered, not really meaning to say it out loud.

But the silence that followed made it echo. Loud. Heavy. He didn’t look at her. Just stared ahead, at the dent in the wall near the door- one he knew wasn’t there before his last birthday. “That’s what they think, right?” he added, voice low. “Mum flinches when I raise my voice. Dad’s always watching me like I’m a bomb that might go off if he breathes wrong. And you…”

He dared a glance at her now. Her mouth was pressed into a flat line, her eyes glossy again. “You tiptoe,” he said. “Even when you’re not trying to.” His voice caught on that last word. Something raw underneath it. He blinked hard. “I don’t blame you,” he added. “I wouldn’t want to be around me either.”

She sighed- not annoyed, not dramatic. Just *tired* . The kind of sigh you let out when you’ve been holding your breath for too long and it finally breaks free. “It’s not that we’re scared of you,” she said softly. “It’s just… you’re older now. You’re not a little kid anymore, James.”

Her eyes darted to his hands- the way his knuckles were scabbed, the way he curled them into himself like he didn't trust them to behave. "You *can* cause more damage now."

James flinched like she'd struck him, even though her voice was quiet. Almost kind. That was worse somehow.

"I know you don't mean to," she added quickly, reaching a hand out and hovering it over his. "But you don't even realise when you're sharp. When you make people freeze. You're intense, James. You always have been. But now… now you fill a room."

He stared at her fingers, hovering like a question mark.

"And sometimes, yeah… that's hard to be around."

James blinked, and something in his throat clicked into place- jagged, defensive, brittle. "I've never hurt anyone," he said, voice low, but not quiet. "Not like that. Not how *he* does."

His sister's face flickered- guilt, maybe, or memory. But he kept going, like if he stopped now the words would choke him. "Dad hits me. *All the time.* You've seen it. You know it. And everyone still looks at *me* like I'm the problem. Like I'm the broken one."

He laughed bitterly, but it didn't sound like laughter at all. It sounded like a crack. "I don't get it. I'm the one with the black eye, and somehow I'm the threat."

Silence poured into the room like smoke. His sister swallowed, eyes glossy again. She opened her mouth, but no words came. What could she say? That he was right? That they'd all let it happen? That they'd left him in the fire and then called him flammable? James looked down at his hands again- as if double-checking that they were still his. That they were still clean.

James sat still for a long moment, the words he'd just said echoing like footsteps down a long, empty hallway. His eyes drifted back to her- his sister, the only person who had ever truly stood between him and the worst of it. And yet.

He blinked slowly, his mouth pressed into a flat line.

"When did you stop believing in me?" he asked, so quietly it barely left his throat. It wasn't accusatory. It was something worse- *disappointed* . Hollow. Fractured. Like he'd only just realised it had happened, and it hurt more than anything his father had ever thrown at him.

She looked at him, startled. Her lips parted like she had a denial ready, but it faltered.

"You used to… you *used* to look at me like I wasn't a burden. Like I was just your annoying little brother who sketched too much and tamed foxes in the garden," he added with a breath of bitter humour. "Now you look at me like I might combust in front of you."

His voice cracked slightly, and he hated that. He hated how honest he was being. But he couldn't stop. "I didn't ask for the madness in this house. I just got born into it."

He didn’t look at her again. He was scared if he did, he’d see her confirming what he already knew. She let out a breath- one of those fragile exhales that sounded like it was trying not to shake. “I know it’s not your fault,” she said softly.

It hit him like a body blow. Not the words. The *way* she said them. Like she’d been carrying them around for years, crumpled and useless in her pocket, unsure when would be the right time to offer them. Like saying them too soon would only set something off, and saying them too late would make her complicit.

James still didn’t look at her. But something behind his ribs pulled tight, like someone had just opened a door he’d nailed shut.

“I know it’s not you, Jim. I know it’s *them* . Him. This house. Everything,” she went on, quieter now. “You didn’t make this place what it is. You’re just trying to survive it.”

She was looking at him, even if he wouldn’t meet her eyes. “You’re still my brother. I’ve *always* believed in you. I just-” Her voice caught. “I don’t know how to help anymore.”

And that- *that* - was what made him look up. James flinched- subtle, but painfully obvious enough to him. His spine straightened like a thread pulled taut. His fingers dug into the bedsheets, the sketchpad forgotten at his side now, its corner pressing against his hip.

"I *am* fine," he said stiffly. Not loud. Not convincing. More like he was trying to remind himself than tell her. He could feel her looking at him, and God, he hated it. That tilted-head concern, that *look* in her eyes that made him feel dissected, cracked open and catalogued.

"I’m normal. I just- " His voice faltered, then narrowed, clipped. “I get fixed on things. That’s not… *weird* . It’s just how I think. How I stay in control.”

His jaw twitched, the bones grinding slightly as he clenched it. “They make it sound like I’m broken,” he added, quieter now. “Like there's something in me that needs *fixing* . But I’m not *wrong* for thinking too much. Or for noticing everything. That’s not sick. That’s not *crazy* .”

His eyes finally met hers- sharp, wild with a simmering need to be understood. To be defended. “I’m not him,” James said, almost a whisper. “I don’t hurt people. I don’t lose control. I just… hold on tighter.”

A door slammed downstairs- hard, sharp, final. The whole house seemed to flinch with it.

James jolted. His sister did too, shoulders tensing, her eyes snapping to the door like prey scenting the predator's return.

The silence that followed was weighted and sour. James felt it in his throat, metallic and thick. His breath caught for a second, and instinctively, his gaze darted to the thin crack beneath his bedroom door, watching the shift of shadows like something might bleed through. Then he looked at her. Her knuckles were white where her hands clutched each other in her lap. "He's home," she whispered, and neither of them needed to say who.

James's eyes narrowed, a bitter edge sharpening his voice as he said, "See? You don't flinch like that around me. Dad's gotten under your skin. He's made you scared." He glanced away, then back, voice dropping low, "And now you're leaving for uni. Leaving me behind to deal with all this alone." His words hung heavy, laced with accusation and something deeper- hurt, maybe even desperation.

She shook her head, soft but firm, like she was setting the record straight once and for all. "I'm not scared of you, James. Never have been. You're not what Dad says." Her voice softened, a little warm now. "I'll message every day, okay? And I want you to send me pictures of your drawings. I wanna see them, even when I'm miles away." She gave him a small, hopeful smile, like she was trying to bridge the distance before it even started.

James scoffed, a quick, sharp sound that barely hid the warmth bubbling beneath. "Typical sister move," he muttered, dragging a hand through his hair like he was trying to shake off the weight of the moment. "Always gotta keep tabs on me." But even as the words left his mouth, he found himself wanting that tether- that link to something normal in the chaos.

She caught the faint pop of a can opening downstairs and tutted, like it was some grim little ritual she hated. "I should probably go say hi to Dad before he gets too wasted." She glanced back at James, eyebrow raised. "You coming?"

James shook his head, voice low. "Nah. Not tonight."

She gave a small sigh, like she knew more than she let on. "Yeah. Probably for the best." Her eyes lingered on him a moment longer, softening. "Just... don't let him make you small, James. You're better than this house."

James nodded, staring out the cracked window. Somewhere beyond the grime and shattered glass, he thought, the sky was wide and endless- unlike this room, where hope felt as trapped as a bird with broken wings.

II

The chair creaked beneath him as James leaned all the way back, bones stretched tight like a bowstring, head tilted toward the ceiling. A low, absent-minded hum floated from his lips- tuneless, maybe made-up, but it was an odd, unsettling tone. Something he'd heard once on the radio, or in a childhood room that didn't exist anymore.

The room was cloaked in a muted blue glow, every monitor humming softly, a half-dozen eyes blinking back at him. Otto was curled somewhere behind him, silent. Outside, rain patted the windows, but inside, it was a void- thick with the electric buzz of paranoia and the weight of too much knowing.

James kept humming. Not because he liked the sound of it, but because the silence was worse. The silence let things crawl into his head.

His fingers drummed against the underside of the desk. Eyes half-lidded, he watched the feeds blink and shuffle- Will's hallway, Will's living room, Will's bedroom. Each room alive with absence.

James's jaw tensed, the hum slipping into silence like a thread cut mid-knot. His eyes were still on the screens, but they weren't really seeing them anymore. Will's apartment blurred at the edges, overtaken by something darker curling in the corners of his mind.

His fingers flexed on the armrest. A twitch. A crackle of heat in his chest.

He hated that man. God, he *hated* him.

His father's voice came back uninvited- that gravelled shout, that bitter breath stinking of beer and failure. Always looming. Always ready to strike first and apologize never. "You're not right, James." "Stop being a bloody freak." "You're lucky we keep you around at all."

James swallowed down the bile rising in his throat.

And his mother, blank-faced at the kitchen sink. Pretending not to hear. Pretending her silence made her innocent. That she hadn't watched and let it happen over and over again.

But worse- worse than all of it- was the sound of the door slamming shut that one afternoon, years ago. His sister's suitcase bumping down the stairs. Her voice bright and strained. "I'll text, okay? You'll be alright. I know you will."

She left.

She *left* him.

And now what? What was he? A man haunted by monitors and memories, watching a boy he barely knew like a lifeline- like Will was the only thing that could drag him back from the pit.

Pathetic.

James sat forward slowly, elbows on his knees, breathing shallow. Maybe his father had been right about one thing. Maybe he *wasn't* right. His fingers curled into fists.

What the hell was he doing?

What kind of man sat alone in a dark room, clinging to flickering feeds like they were scripture? Watching someone who didn't *belong* to him, who never had- who *shouldn't* . Not like this.

James stood too fast, the chair scraping against the floor. His chest heaved. Heat surged through him like battery acid. He hated the lump in his throat, hated the dampness suddenly prickling at the corners of his eyes. He was not weak. He was *not* -

He turned, eyes locked on the monitors.

Will brushing his teeth. Will folding laundry. Will laughing into a phone call James couldn't hear. All these moments that weren't *his* - stolen like shiny things hoarded by a magpie with bloodied claws. James felt sick.

"This isn't love," he hissed aloud, though no one was there to hear it. "I'm just like *him* ."

He stormed toward the wall of screens, the hum of electricity in his ears like a swarm. His breath caught in his chest- his own reflection in one of the black edges: wide-eyed, hollow, rabid. A stranger.

He wanted to scream. He *wanted to stop watching* . But he didn't know how. And god help him, he was starting to hate the man behind the glass.

His breath shuddered out of him as his gaze flicked to the corner of the room. There it was. Leaning innocently against the side of the desk- the old wooden bat. The varnish worn smooth from years of use, the grip tape still fraying at the edges.

He hadn't touched it in forever.

Back then, it had meant something else. Sunlight through the leaves, the hollow *crack* of the bat against the ball, and the scramble of paws across damp grass as their golden retriever chased it like it was the most important job in the world. James used to laugh until his ribs ached. His sister would cheer. Their mother would smile tightly from the kitchen window. Even his dad- God, even *he* would offer some half-hearted praise, as if pretending for a second they were a real family.

Now? Now the bat looked like it was waiting for something.

Not for a ball. Not for a dog. No. Now it waited with a darker kind of patience. The kind that knew it had outlived its innocence and was hungry for a different kind of swing. James swallowed hard. He stepped forward.

Memories were such fragile things. It didn't take much to repurpose them into weapons.

James reached for the bat like it might bite him. His fingers closed around the grip, familiar ridges pressing into his palm like an old friend dragging him back into something he'd tried to forget.

It was heavier than he remembered. Or maybe he was just different now. Not a kid anymore, not soft around the edges with scraped knees and sunburned cheeks. Now he was sharper. Quieter. Angrier.

He lifted it, let it hover in the air. His wrist flexed instinctively, muscle memory kicking in. *Swing. Balance. Weight.* He turned it once, then twice, slow rotations like a conductor's baton before the overture began. And God- it felt *good* . Solid. Real. Not like the cold flickering screens or the wavering lines between right and wrong. The bat didn't lie. It didn't manipulate or hide or whisper doubts in the back of his mind. It was honest. Brutal, maybe. But honest.

He ran his thumb over the splintered edge of the wood. His breath slowed. Power, he thought, wasn't always about watching. Sometimes it was about *doing* .

His eyes snapped to the monitors- a row of glowing, taunting eyes lined up like judges at a trial he never agreed to attend. Every feed flickered in artificial light, cold and constant, like the heartbeat of his obsession.

It made him sick.

Sick with himself. Sick with how long he'd sat here, letting these screens breathe *for* him. He didn't sleep without them. He didn't eat without checking them. He didn't *exist* unless they were humming.

The bat in his hand suddenly felt *righteous* . His heart hammered like it knew what came next- like it was trying to claw its way out of his chest before he did something he couldn't take back.

"Fuck," he muttered, jaw tight. " *Fuck.* "

He took a step forward. The monitors didn't flinch. Didn't cower. They stared back, glassy and indifferent, watching *him* for once.

He hated them. Every goddamn pixel. Every frame. Every whisper of Will's smile caught in their static. He tightened his grip on the bat. He just wanted to *destroy them* . It surged up from beneath his ribs like bile- hot, acidic, unfiltered rage. Not the kind that simmered quietly in the back of his mind. No. This was primal. Raw. It clawed its way up his throat like a scream too long swallowed, like a fire that had been fed and fed and finally found a way to burn through the walls he'd built around it.

Years. Years of being made to feel like nothing. Of being watched, hit, left, pitied. Of needing, wanting, obsessing- never having. His father's snarls, his sister's apologies, the therapist's fucking clipboard, Will's eyes like oceans that refused to let him drown.

And now here they were- the monitors, lined up like coffins. Gleaming. Quiet. Smug.

A laugh ripped from his chest- broken, humorless, wild. He dragged the bat up, holding it like it was made for this moment. Like he was made for this moment.

The first swing came without thought- just instinct, just the sickening harmony of rage meeting steel. The bat tore through the air with a whistle and *cracked* against the screen with a sound so brutal, so sharp, it rang in his ears like a gunshot. The monitor didn't just break, it *shattered* , splintered inward like glass lungs imploding, sparks coughing from the fractured plastic ribs.

James staggered back half a step, breath caught in his throat, heart hammering like it wanted out of his ribcage. The static fizzled, a sharp line across the broken face, and he could *feel* something inside him unwind. Like the first breath after being held underwater.

Then it came again- that thrum of euphoria, sick and powerful, like bloodlust for silence.

He *roared* . Actually *roared* - something animal, ugly, inhuman, echoing off the walls of his apartment as he gripped the bat with both hands and *swung again* .

This wasn't some poetic meltdown. This was *destruction* - unholy, unapologetic, holy fire kind of destruction. Bits of glass scattered like shattered teeth. Plastic tore like flesh. Wires dangled like intestines. The rage in his chest had gone full nuclear. He wasn't just breaking screens. He was tearing out eyes. Every watching eye. Every judging, blinking, *knowing* eye.

He didn't hesitate.

Another swing- faster this time, vicious, purposeful. The bat collided with the next monitor with a *metallic thud* , glass webbing instantly, the feed blinking out in a stutter of static before going black. Gone. Just like that.

Another eye blinded.

James stood there, chest heaving, the bat still raised, his knuckles white around the grip. Something inside him cracked open with the screen- a pressure valve releasing, like bile being purged, like air finally filling lungs that had been strangled by silence.

The sudden absence of the live feed… God, it was intoxicating. Like rain after drought. Like his mind had been burning in a heatwave of obsession and one by one, these shattered screens were storms breaking across dry earth. Each flickering feed that vanished left behind a hush. A calm. And it wasn't peace- no, nothing so soft- but it was *control* .

And James had been starving for it.

The rage didn't subside. If anything, it bloomed. Heavy and boiling in his chest like lava edging the rim. His breath came in tight little gasps, not from exertion but from *relief* . Pure, snarling relief.

Because for once- *for once* - he was doing something about it.

All those months of slipping cameras into vents, of praying for connection, of cataloguing every movement Will made like he was God's archivist for a single mortal life- it was *weird* .

Fucked . He *knew* that. It scraped under his skin like a rash he couldn't admit out loud. But destroying it? Smashing the feed? Ripping it all out at the root?

It felt *divine* .

This wasn't shame. This was reclamation. He was reclaiming whatever was left of himself beneath the sick obsession he'd wrapped in velvet excuses. And God, it felt good to wreck it. He'd done something deranged, something nobody in their right mind would excuse- and now he was punishing it. Punishing *himself* . And that made it okay. Didn't it?

The monitors had been his eyes into heaven, but they were also his shackles. And now- bat clenched, shoulders trembling, heart rabid- he was cutting the chains.

He was God now. And God had had enough.

He raised the bat again, fingers curling tighter around the worn handle like it was a lifeline- and a weapon all at once. The air in the room thickened, pulsing with something fierce and ancient, like the moment before a storm shatters a quiet town. His breath hitched, slow and deliberate, drawing out every second as if he was savoring the end of a long nightmare.

With a slow, cruel grace, he swung the bat. Time stretched, the arc of wood slicing through the stale air, tracing a perfect, furious parabola. The monitor exploded beneath the blow- the screen shattering like cracked ice, shards spraying outward like frozen tears from a broken soul.

The glass tinkled as it rained onto the floor, the darkened screen flickering once, twice, before it died. That hollow silence afterward was deafening. It filled the room like a thick fog, wrapping around his ribs and squeezing, reminding him how utterly alone he was.

But instead of fear or regret, a wild thrill coursed through him. His heart pounded a savage rhythm, fierce and untamed. Another piece of his twisted sanctuary destroyed. Another link severed from the cage he'd built around himself.

He let the bat hang loose in his hands, chest heaving. The shattered monitor's black void seemed to mock the surveillance he'd obsessed over- gone now, vanquished by sheer will. His eyes glittered with something dark and triumphant. This destruction was a reckoning. It was justice.

He stood there, bat poised in mid-air, the heavy weight of it like a promise in his hands. His gaze snapped to the last monitor, his kitchen feed, the one he couldn't quite bring himself to destroy. And then, there he was. Will.

Will, caught in the grainy glow of the screen, moving with that slow, unhurried ease. The kind of careless grace that twisted James' insides into knots he couldn't name. Will stopped. His body straightened, a ghost of a smirk curling at the corner of his mouth. And then, his lips moved.

James froze, breath shallow, eyes narrowing.

“Fuck,” James hissed through gritted teeth, staring at the dark, broken edge of the monitor he hadn’t smashed- yet. His breath fogged the screen for a moment, the reflection of his own wide, bloodshot eyes flickering back at him. “Why didn’t I wire for sound?”

His fingers slipped on the bat, slick with sweat. He let it lower, the head thudding dully against the floor. His attention snapped back to the monitor. Will was still there in the feed, standing just off-centre in James’ kitchen. That half-smile hadn’t faltered. Those maddeningly blue eyes hadn’t blinked. James stepped in closer, so close the static hummed against his skin. He hit rewind. Pause. Play. Rewind. Pause. Play. Over and over, frame by frame. Each time, those lips moved the same way.

James muttered the options under his breath, his voice rough and rising. The bat clattered to the floor behind him, forgotten now. “Come on, Will… what did you say?” he whispered to the empty room.

And again- rewind. Pause. Play. And again. And again. And again. Like a ritual. Like an obsession. Like a punishment.

It happened on the twenty-sixth replay.

James was leaning in so close to the monitor his breath fogged the screen again. The room was deadly silent- Otto nowhere to be seen, the hum of the power strip the only thing grounding him in the present. He moved his lips along with the screen one more time. Soft. Subtle. Intentional.

And then- *“Smile for the camera, James.”*

It fit.

Perfectly.

The movement of Will’s mouth. The cadence. The smug, glinting pause before the word *“James.”* It matched.

James froze, muscles locking in place. His throat constricted, eyes flickering between Will’s frozen image on the screen and his own trembling reflection in the glass. The bat was still on the floor behind him. His sweat had gone cold. Clammy. Like someone had poured ice water down the back of his neck. The sensation slithered over his spine, a full-body chill that clung to his skin like frostbite.

His breathing picked up.

Inhale- sharp. Exhale- shallow. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

Will knew. He knew. He’d *known.* He’d stood there and said it like a villain in a film. Not afraid. Not confused. But *in control.*

James’ fingers twitched at his side. That smile hadn’t been innocent. It had been a warning. A taunt. An invitation. “Holy fuck,” James whispered, staggering back a step.

Smile for the camera, James.

Those words echoed in his skull like a gunshot. He scrambled- messy, graceless, frantic.

The chair toppled backward with a crash as James dropped to his knees, scrabbling across the floor with trembling fingers for the bat. His heartbeat thundered in his ears, his vision tunneled in on the screen- *that* monitor- where Will's image stood frozen in knowing calm.

The bat was slick in his grip from his own sweat as he stood. Not even fully upright before he moved. His body was moving before his brain could follow.

And then-

CRACK.

The swing came from somewhere deep, somewhere visceral. Somewhere old. It was all fury and humiliation and sheer white terror poured into one single, catastrophic hit. The monitor screamed in pixels before spiderwebbing violently, the center warping around the impact like a ripple across still water. Will's face cracked- split- shattered. His smirk fragmented into static and warped glass.

James let out a guttural noise. Something between a yell and a sob.

And he didn't stop.

CRACK. Again. *CRACK.* The shards jumped from the frame like fleeing insects. *CRACK.* Until the screen no longer resembled anything but chaos.

Shards rained across the floor, and James stood there, chest heaving, bat still lifted as though the ghost of Will's smile might return and mock him again. But all that stared back was fractured plastic and the dim reflection of himself, jagged and disfigured by the wreckage.

He left it all behind- the shattered screen, the splinters of Will's smirk, the wreckage of his own obsession bleeding into the carpet like it was alive.

James stumbled, his knees barely holding weight, legs trembling as though the rage had drained every ounce of energy from them. The bat dangled limply in one hand, still heavy with the violence it had just carried out. His fingers ached around its grip, white-knuckled and raw. He half-collapsed into the living room, feet dragging over the floor, breath ragged and chest tight. In the soft gloom of the living room, there was still one ordinary thing left: his glass of water, untouched on the windowsill. Like a memory of normalcy, waiting.

He reached for it with his free hand, wrist trembling so badly the glass clinked against the frame. He managed to lift it- barely- but the moment it touched his lips, it tilted too far. Cold water spilled over, cascading down his chin, soaking the collar of his shirt.

He didn't move to wipe it. Just stood there, blinking, throat dry, bat still hanging at his side like an extension of his own ruin.

He looked like a man who'd lost a war he started.

The glass slipped first.

A slow tilt, then a sharp release- his fingers just let go. It hit the floor with a crisp, ringing shatter. Water splashed in every direction, soaking into the rug and shimmering across the wood like spilled secrets. The bat followed a heartbeat later, thudding down hard beside the wreckage. It rolled once, bumped against the wall, then stilled.

James stood frozen for a moment, staring at the mess as if it were something abstract, like art. Like pain in physical form.

And then- his knees gave.

He collapsed, heavy and graceless, into the glittering wreckage. Jagged pieces of glass bit into his legs through the thin fabric of his trousers, slicing shallow but real. He barely reacted. Just knelt there, water soaking into his knees, arms limp by his sides as his shoulders started to shake.

The first sob was quiet. A small, cracked sound that escaped without permission.

The next was louder.

Then came the storm.

He sobbed with his whole body- like something guttural had finally erupted out of him after years of being buried beneath performance, obsession, control. His cries tore through the silence of the room, ugly and raw. He bent forward, forehead nearly touching the floor, hands fisting into the wet, glittering mess like he didn’t care what bled anymore.

There was nothing left to hold. Nothing left to hide behind. Just the glass, the water, and the man who had broken everything.

III

The notebook sat heavy in James' lap, damp at the corners from where his hands wouldn't stop sweating.

He was perched on the old wooden bench in the middle of the courtyard- the one no one ever used because it creaked too loud and tilted too much to one side. It was late. Cold. The kind of quiet that pressed in around him like gauze. Distant sounds of traffic, someone's telly buzzing through paper-thin walls, a dog barking twice then never again.

James didn't hear any of it.

He was too busy thumbing through his own madness.

Page after page. Sketch after sketch. All of them were Will. Not always recognisable. Some just impressions- hands, curls of hair, a slouch of shoulder. Others were sharper. Full portraits. He'd captured Will laughing once. From memory. That one had scratch marks through it now, like James couldn't stand to look at it for more than a second before needing to ruin it.

The further he flipped, the worse it got. Drawings of Will asleep. Will at the window. Will unaware. His stomach twisted. Because every line, every shaded cheekbone and every carefully-rendered fold in Will's hoodie, had been made with care. With love. With possession.

He turned another page, and there Will was- sat on James' sofa, barefoot and chewing on something, eyes mid-roll from some sarcastic comment. James had drawn that one only a week ago.

His fingers hovered again. Then, almost against his own will, he flipped the notebook- this time near the back. The pages here were different. Not worse, exactly. Just… damning. The pencil lines were more frantic, the smudges darker. His obsession wasn't romantic here- it was raw. Desperate.

There was a sketch of Will's front door, done from memory and repetition. The exact placement of the peephole, the tiny crack in the paint near the bottom, the way the handle tilted ever-so-slightly downward. Next- Will's bedroom. From above. Like a god's eye. James had drawn the placement of furniture, the slant of shadow from the morning light, the exact contour of the duvet when Will was inside it.

He swallowed. The next page. A hand. Will's. Outstretched on the sofa, limp in sleep. James had labelled the knuckles. Annotated the sketch like a specimen. One of the notes read, *"Always curls the index slightly. Why?"*

James flipped faster now, his face hot. Another- Will brushing his teeth. Shirtless. His gaze caught in the mirror, like he was looking through the page. Then one more. A full-body sketch. Will, asleep, on his side. From the angle James could only ever get from the vent camera. The pillow was half-kicked away. His spine curved in that familiar, vulnerable way.

The duvet was drawn lazily over one hip. James had written nothing beside that one. Just circled it. Twice.

He slammed the notebook shut again, breath hitching. The bench beneath him groaned.

These weren't sketches. They were evidence.

Of what he'd done. Of what he was. His fingers hovered on the front cover, which was warped now, too many pages crumpled from overuse. It looked tired. Unclean. Diseased. Like something that needed to be put down.

James stood slowly, joints cracking from the weight of what he'd just seen. He didn't look at the notebook as he placed it carefully on the bench, almost reverently- like it was a body. Like it had a soul. Maybe it did. Maybe it had *his.* The cold metal bin in the courtyard sat a few feet away, rusted in patches and dented from years of careless use by strangers. It would do. It had to.

He bent low beside it, unscrewing the red cap of the gasoline container with trembling hands. The scent hit him immediately- sharp, metallic, nostalgic in a way that made his gut churn. It reminded him of camping trips, of bonfires that weren't warm, just loud. Of his father's clumsy hands and too-fast flames.

James poured with slow, measured movements. The liquid splashed at the bottom of the bin, coating its insides like it was prepping for confession. When the small canister was empty, he set it down beside the bench. He looked back at the notebook. It hadn't moved. Of course it hadn't. But somehow, it looked accusatory now. Like it *knew* what was coming.

His fingers twitched at his sides. His chest rose, fell, rose again- faster now. Almost like a countdown.

James fished the battered matchbox from the inside pocket of his coat, the cardboard edges softened by time and anxiety. He turned it in his palm once, then slid it open with a flick of his thumb. Only a few matches left. Enough to end something.

He pulled one out- red-tipped, slender, innocent-looking. The kind of thing that could start a campfire or a catastrophe. It trembled in his fingers as he struck it against the strip. The flare was sudden and angry, the head crackling to life with a hiss. For a moment, James stared into the flame, holding it upright like a priest with a candle. The light flickered against his face, catching the exhaustion carved beneath his eyes, dancing across the chapped line of his lips.

Then- without ceremony- he tossed it in.

The gasoline caught immediately. A deep *whomp* of ignition, and then a sudden bloom of fire- too fast, too tall, licking up the inside walls of the bin like it had been waiting for release. It hissed and spat as the metal groaned in the heat, orange and blue tongues writhing like fury incarnate.

James stepped back from the roaring blaze, his eyes fixed on the metal bin as the flames clawed hungrily at the gasoline-soaked pages inside. Then, almost instinctively, his fingers

closed around the worn cover of his notebook resting on the bench beside him. He lifted it, feeling the familiar weight in his hands- roughened paper, fading sketches, and ink-stained edges that had become extensions of his own skin.

The leather cover creaked softly as he flexed it open, and for a moment, the world shrank to the thin sheaf of paper beneath his fingertips. He turned the pages slowly, almost reverently, each one a confession, a memory, a fragment of obsession. His sketches of Will- delicate, haunting, charged with something dangerous and fragile all at once- stared back at him.

The weight of it settled deep in his chest, and a cold shiver ran through him. This notebook wasn't just ink and paper. It was a cycle, a tether to the spiraling path that had brought him here. A reminder that his downfall had roots in the simple act of holding a pencil, marking what shouldn't have been captured. He swallowed hard, the edges of his vision blurred. This was the beginning, and perhaps, here- in the burning- he could find some fragile end.

With a final, lingering look at the fragile pages, James clenched the notebook tight. The leather was warm beneath his fingertips, almost pleading, but he steeled himself. In one swift motion, he hurled it into the heart of the fire.

The flames greedily swallowed the book, the edges curling and blackening, ink smearing and bleeding like dark tears across the paper. A sharp crackling filled the cold night air as the fire consumed his memories, his secrets, and every whispered thought etched in those pages.

For a moment, James stood frozen- watching the notebook twist and fold in the inferno, feeling a strange mix of loss and release coil inside him, as if burning away a piece of himself, both torment and salvation. "Why can't I just stop?" he muttered, voice low and rough, barely a whisper. "It's all just a game. A little game of control, of watching, of knowing."

His fingers curled into fists, nails digging into his palms. "Every move he makes, every breath, it's all mine to claim. Mine to dissect, to twist, to own. He's just a fragile little puzzle piece that thinks it's a masterpiece. But he's won, hasn't he?"

He laughed- sharp, bitter, like poison dripping off his tongue. "God, I'm losing it."

The silence that followed felt suffocating. He spun toward the bench where his bag sat like a silent sentinel, the one small thing that tethered him to reality. A soft meow broke through the darkness like a fragile lifeline.

James froze.

Slowly, almost reverently, he knelt and unzipped the bag, pulling out Otto with gentle hands, cradling the cat like a fragile being. Otto's soft fur was warm beneath his fingertips, the delicate purring vibrating through James' palm. He bent his head, pressing a slow, cautious kiss between Otto's ears, lips brushing the fur as if the softness could smooth the jagged edges of his mind.

"Hey, little guy," James whispered, voice cracking just enough to betray the storm inside. Stroking Otto's cheek, he closed his eyes, letting the simple, quiet presence of the cat ground

him, even if just for a moment.

James rose slowly, still cradling Otto like the fragile little trophy he was. The fire crackled nearby, hungry and eager, licking the edges of the dark night like it wanted to swallow everything whole. He walked back toward the flames, every step careful, eyes never leaving the flickering dance of orange and gold. The heat kissed his skin, but it was nothing compared to the fire burning behind his eyes.

Otto nestled against his chest, warm and real in a world that was starting to unravel. James tightened his hold just a little- like if he let go, even for a second, everything might collapse.

James stared deep into the fire, watching it consume the air, imagining the notebook- his secrets, his madness- turning to ash, piece by piece. The flames flickered wildly, like they knew what was coming, like they could taste the chaos that followed.

He whispered under his breath, “One day, it’s all going to burn. And then maybe… maybe I’ll finally be free.”

Otto purred, oblivious to the darkness folding around them both. James shifted Otto in his arms, the cat’s soft body warm against his chest like the only piece of calm left in his storm. He looked down at those unblinking eyes, so innocent, so *utterly* oblivious to all the chaos.

“You know,” James murmured, voice low, thick with something dangerous, “I forgive you. For... favoring him. Will.” He chuckled, a little bitter, like swallowing glass. “You don’t have to choose, but you always do. Always him.”

Otto blinked slowly, purring like he didn’t have a clue what betrayal even meant. James pressed his lips- not a kiss, no, not that soft, sweet crap- but just *felt* the smooth warmth of fur against his mouth. Like grounding himself. Like stealing a moment of peace from the madness clawing inside him.

His hand curled around the cat’s cheek, stroking slowly- like he was memorizing the texture, the softness, the undeniable truth that Otto was the only thing that didn’t lie to him.

And maybe, just maybe, that was enough.

Otto’s eyes suddenly sharpened, pupils narrowing as he stared past James like he saw through to something darker- something *waiting* . His ears twitched, the slightest flick of alertness. James caught the change, his heart stuttering like a glitchy heartbeat. *What the hell are you looking at, huh?* he thought, voice barely a whisper in his own head.

Slowly, almost reluctantly, James followed Otto’s gaze upward. His neck craned, eyes squinting through the moonlight gloom toward the only apartment window with a light on- Will’s window.

There he was. A shadow- a silhouette carved out by the warm, lazy glow of the inside light. Still. Watching. Waiting. The figure was too vague to be certain, but James didn’t need certainty. The tension coiled tight in his chest like a predator ready to strike.

A slow, bitter smile curled at his lips. *Well, well, Will.*

James lifted his hand- still cradling Otto like the precious little weapon he was- and gave the window a fragile two-fingered wave. Not too much, not too little. Just enough to say, *I see you.*

His eyes locked on the silhouette, voice nowhere near loud enough to cross the distance, but dripping with venom anyway: “Hello, Lenney.”

Otto twitched in his arms, purring softly, completely clueless about the power play unfolding just inches away. James’s grin was sly, dark, and *so* damn knowing. Will still couldn’t resist watching him.

From the warm glow behind the glass, Will’s silhouette shifted. He lifted a hand in a soft, almost lazy wave back- like he was saying, *Yeah, I see you too, creep.* And just as quickly as he appeared, the figure slipped away, swallowed by the shadows beyond the window frame, leaving nothing but the faint echo of that silent challenge hanging in the air. James’s eyes lingered on the empty window, lips curling with a mix of satisfaction and hunger.

James let out a low, sharp huff of laughter- half amusement, half disbelief- like he couldn’t quite decide if this whole game was hilarious or insane.

He turned away from the empty window, eyes drawn back to the fire’s hypnotic dance, the flames flickering like secrets waiting to be burned. Still cradling Otto, James leaned down, pressing his nose into the soft fur between the cat’s ears. The warmth grounded him, even if just for a fleeting second.

And in that quiet breath, with Otto’s steady purr humming beneath him, James let the madness wait just a little longer.

IIII

The bell above the café door gave its usual lazy chime as James pushed it open, the familiar scent of burnt espresso and old books immediately curling into his lungs. It should've been comforting. Predictable. *His* place.

He stepped inside, the summer air clinging to his jacket, a faint sheen of sweat on his temple. One iced Americano, extra ice, no room- just like always. Just like every Thursday at 3:47 p.m.

But today, something was wrong.

The air was too still. The usual barista didn't look up. Something shifted.

James's eyes swept the café with the kind of casual glance that was anything but. And then he saw it. *Him.*

Will.

Already seated. Already watching.

James stood frozen just past the threshold, iced coffee in hand, condensation sliding down his fingers like the nerves he refused to admit to. He didn't sit. Didn't blink. Just stared back. Will's gaze was unreadable- calm, cool, almost bored- but that was the problem. James couldn't *feel* him. No simmering hostility, no flicker of guilt, not even that slight narrowing of the eyes he used to catch when Will was lying. It was like trying to read smoke. The silence between them stretched taut, a loaded string waiting to snap, and James felt something he hadn't felt in a long time- *off-balance.*

James took a slow sip of his drink, just to have something to do with his mouth that wasn't asking *why are you here?* or worse, *how much do you know?* His legs felt unsteady, like they didn't trust the floor anymore, but he moved anyway- each step cautious, like approaching a wild animal that might bolt or bite. Will didn't look away. Didn't flinch. Just waited. When James reached the table, he hovered for a second too long, gripping the iced cup like it might anchor him to reality. "…Can I sit?" he asked, voice quieter than he meant, a thin thread of something almost like fear curling behind it. Not because he thought Will would say no- because he wasn't sure what would happen if he said yes.

Will tilted his head slightly, lips pressing into a thin line as if he were genuinely *considering* it- like James was just some guy asking for a spare seat, not the monster who'd spent months dissecting his life frame by frame. And then, just as James's chest began to tighten with the silence, Will smiled. Not mockingly. Not cold. Just… soft. Familiar. The kind of smile that used to uncoil something gentle in James before everything rotted. And for a second- just one treacherous second- James almost felt warm again. Like maybe, *maybe* , there was still something in this wreckage that hadn't turned to ash.

Will's smile lingered just long enough to make James hope, then tilted into something sharper- wry, knowing, a little too amused for comfort. "Well," he said, voice smooth with

just a flick of venom, “I suppose it’d be rude to make you hover like a lost little ghost.” He leaned back in his chair, legs casually crossed. “Go on, James. You can sit.”

And just like that, the warmth turned brittle in James’s chest- because the permission was real, but the power behind it? That was all Will.

James lowered himself into the seat, careful, composed- like sitting too fast might shatter whatever this was. The chair creaked beneath him, loud in the quiet thrum of the café, but Will didn’t flinch. He just watched.

And for a moment, James let himself *look* . Really look.

Will’s hair was a little longer than before, messier around the edges like he’d been running his fingers through it all day. The soft golden light from the window hit his cheekbones just right, making his skin look too perfect, too *untouchable* . Even now- especially now- he was stupidly beautiful. Like a painting someone had walked away from mid-restoration, half-light, half-ghost, and all James wanted was to crawl inside the canvas and never come out.

His chest ached with it. That unbearable ache of want wrapped in guilt wrapped in obsession.

Will rested his elbow on the table, chin propped in his palm like this was just a lazy afternoon, like they were still *them* - like none of it had ever happened. “I knew you’d come here,” he said, almost too casually. “You’ve been by every day this week. Always around this time.”

James blinked, heart lurching just slightly, fingers tightening around his cup. “What,” he muttered, a half-laugh curling at the edge of his mouth, sharp and thin, “ *you’re* watching *me* now?”

Will shrugged, eyes glinting. “Fitting, no?”

James bit his lip- just lightly, just enough to ground himself, to play it cool like he wasn’t spiraling under the surface. He nodded a little, as if this conversation was casual, as if the past few months hadn’t been a descent into surveillance and madness. Maybe… maybe this *could* still work. Maybe they could sit across from each other like this and rewrite the story, clean the blood from the margins and pretend it was poetry.

He opened his mouth, breath catching- “Will, I-”

But Will cut him off with a soft, almost bored hum. “Don’t.”

No malice. No fire. Just quiet finality. Like he already knew what James was going to say. Like he’d heard it before, in a thousand imagined versions.

James dropped his gaze to his iced coffee like it held the secrets of the universe. The condensation trailed down the cup in lazy rivulets, pooling beneath his fingers. He watched it with fierce concentration, like if he stared hard enough, he could drown in it instead of the silence.

Across from him, Will tilted his head slightly. “How’s Otto?” he asked, voice light, almost playful- like they were two old friends catching up instead of two ghosts picking over the bones of something rotten.

James’s throat tightened. Of *course* Will asked about Otto. The one piece of him that was still soft. Still good. James let out a quiet breath, eyes still fixed on the swirling ice like it might answer for him. “He’s fine,” he said, the words almost sticking. “Still being a little menace. Stole half a croissant off my plate this morning. Didn’t even look guilty.”

A pause. The kind that stretches too long, too raw.

Then, softer- softer than he meant it, almost like it slipped out: “He misses you.”

And it hung there between them, delicate and heavy all at once. Will raised an eyebrow, lips twitching into something dangerously close to a smirk. “Yeah?” he said, picking up his iced latte with a languid grace. “Well, at least *one* of you has the emotional maturity to admit it.”

He took a sip- calm, unbothered, like he hadn’t just driven a needle straight under James’s ribs with a smile.

James’s gaze dropped to the table, lashes low, jaw tight. He watched a faint coffee ring near Will’s cup, the way a stray sugar packet lay crumpled beside it. Harmless. Ordinary.

And yet.

James realised the angle of his own head. The way his shoulders dipped. The silence in his throat. To an outsider, it looked an awful lot like submission. And the second he realised it, it made something dark and sick stir in his chest- because he wasn’t sure if it *disgusted* him… or if he *liked* it. He was always in control. Always. And now, he was strikingly aware that that was not the case.

Will set his cup down with a soft clink, fingers still wrapped around it like the warmth might steady him. His eyes never left James. “I went to Mikey’s funeral,” he said, voice cool- like he wasn’t just dropping a loaded weapon between them, but placing it there with care.

No drama. No accusation. Just a fact.

And it landed like a gunshot anyway.

James’s eyes flicked back up, cautious, testing. Like a dog approaching a hand it isn’t sure will pet or strike.

“Yeah?” he said, voice light, too light. “What was it like?”

Will blinked once, slowly, like he couldn’t believe the words had actually left James’s mouth. His expression flattened. “What was it *like* ?” he echoed, eyebrows lifting. “James, it was a *funeral.* Not a concert.” He leaned back slightly, tone dry enough to cut. “There weren’t party bags, if that’s what you’re asking.”

James shrugged, trying to sound casual but coming off more clueless than he intended. “Sad, then?”

Will blinked, mouth twitching like he was fighting back a laugh- or maybe just disbelief. “What the hell *are* you even on right now?” he said, voice dripping with equal parts confusion and amusement. “You’re sitting across from me, and you’re asking if it was ‘sad’?”

James just shrugged again, a crooked, almost helpless grin flickering on his lips. “Guess I’m still figuring it out.”

Will’s eyes darkened just a shade as he replied, voice low but steady. “Yeah, it was sad. Everyone was crying. He died young.” He paused, letting the weight hang heavy in the air before tilting his head with a sly, almost bitter smile. “But you’d know all about that, wouldn’t you?”

The words weren’t an accusation exactly, more like a challenge wrapped in silk- knowing, pointed, and designed to unsettle. James let out a short, dry laugh, the kind that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Can’t say I’ve been to many funerals,” he admitted, voice low and careful, like weighing each word before it escaped. “Not exactly my scene.”

He glanced up, meeting Will’s gaze for just a second- brief, guarded- before looking away, like even that little truth felt like too much to hold. Will’s eyes sharpened, a slow, knowing smile creeping back onto his lips. “We both know what I know,” he said softly, almost like a whisper, but heavy enough to crush. “So don’t pretend like you’re clueless.”

The words hung between them- unspoken histories, shared shadows- thick with everything they *both* wanted to forget but couldn’t.

James swallowed hard, the weight of Will’s words settling like ice in his stomach. He *knew* - deep down, he knew- that Will probably did know everything, every dark corner James had tried to hide. But how? How did Will have the pieces James thought he’d buried so carefully? The thought clawed at him, twisting with a mix of fear and disbelief. It wasn’t just that Will was watching- it was that Will *understood* , and that was far more dangerous. James looked away, tracing the rim of his cup, desperate to find a crack in the silence where answers might hide.

Will’s expression softened for the briefest moment, just enough to crack the ice around him. He leaned in slightly, voice low, almost hesitant. “I don’t see the flickering of those monitors in your office anymore. Through the window”

It wasn’t an accusation. Not quite. More like an observation- a quiet sign that something had shifted, that maybe James wasn’t quite the same puppet behind the glass. And just like that, the weight between them felt a little less heavy.

James’s eyes darkened, shadow creeping in like a storm rolling in fast. His voice dropped low, edged with something sharp and final. “I destroyed them.”

No hesitation. No regret. Just the cold certainty of someone who burned their own bridges- maybe to keep control, or maybe because there was nothing left worth watching anymore.

The silence that followed was heavy. Heavy and dangerous. Will arched an eyebrow, that signature smirk playing at the corners of his mouth like he was biting back a laugh. "Oh, really? Destroyed them?" He leaned back, folding his arms with a teasing edge. "Wasn't I interesting enough to keep watching anymore, or did you just get bored?"

The sass dripped thick, but beneath it was that sharp, skeptical glint- like he wasn't buying James's little death-of-the-cameras act for one second.

James smirked, a slow, knowing curve that dripped with sass and just enough venom to sting. "Maybe it didn't feel the same," he said, voice low and teasing, "once you started staring back through the lens."

His eyes locked with Will's, daring, sharp- like a silent challenge wrapped in a smirk. "Watching isn't the same when you're watching me back. Kinda defeats the whole mysterious vibe."

Will scoffed, shaking his head like he couldn't believe James was actually making this *worse* .
"You *do* realize how psychotic you sound, right?" he said, voice dripping with mock concern.

James didn't miss a beat, biting back fast and sharp. "Yeah? Well, you've been *real* fucking cheeky with your whole 'smile for the camera' game." He leaned in just a little, eyes glittering with dark amusement. "Don't act like you weren't enjoying the spotlight."

Will shook his head slowly, eyes narrowing with a mix of disbelief and something almost like pity. "No matter how fucked up your life's been, James... I still can't believe it was bad enough to turn you into the psychopath you are now." His voice was low, steady- like he was stating a fact no one wanted to admit but everyone feared. "Some things just... don't add up."

James's jaw tightened, a dark fire flickering behind his eyes. "I've always been different," he said, voice cold and steady, like a blade sliding out of its sheath. "You think this twisted shit started with you? No. It's been there all along."

He leaned forward, voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. "And I *hate* how you played me."

The tension between them thickened, electric and raw- two predators circling, neither willing to blink first. Will's eyes snapped wide, disbelief flickering across his face like a storm breaking. His voice cracked just a bit too loud, sharp enough to cut through the café's quiet hum. "James, *you* literally put cameras in my fucking house!"

Before his words could echo further, James shot him a look- urgent, fierce- and pressed a finger to his lips. "Shh," he hissed, voice low but deadly. "Not here."

The tension snapped tight between them, heavy and unspoken, like a powder keg ready to blow. Will's disbelief twisted into something almost like satisfaction- a slow, knowing smile creeping across his lips. He saw it now: the flicker of fear James couldn't quite mask, the tiny crack in that tough exterior.

"That's cute," Will said softly, eyes gleaming with dark amusement. "You're scared."

James hissed quietly, teeth barely parting as he leaned in just enough for his voice to slice through the quiet. “Maybe I don’t want the café- *our* café- to know I put cameras in your ‘fucking’ house.”

His eyes locked with Will’s, sharp and warning, the weight of that secret hanging heavy between them. “Some things are better left... unspoken.”

Will’s eyes narrowed, voice dripping with sarcasm as he leaned forward, fingers steepled like he was savoring the game. “So, what’s the plan then? Pretend it never happened? Sweep it under the rug? Or maybe you’re just gonna try and *woo me back into bed* like nothing’s changed?”

His smirk was razor-sharp, cutting through the tension with a wicked edge.
“Because, trust me, James- this little stunt? It’s not exactly romantic.”

James smirked, that sly, dangerous grin curling at the corner of his mouth. “You know, I’m pretty sure you liked what we did together,” he said, voice low and teasing, “all that... fun.”

He paused, eyes flickering with something almost vulnerable- then shrugged. “Honestly? I don’t really have a plan right now. Which is... weird for me.” The admission hung there, unexpected and raw, like a crack in his carefully built armor.

Will’s tone shifted- just a fraction softer, cautious like he was stepping into a minefield. “Why’d you do it all, James? The cameras, the watching... all of it?” His eyes searched James’s face, looking for something beneath the bravado- something real. “What were you trying to prove?”

James rolled the question around in his mind, weighing the truth against the walls he’d built so carefully. When he finally spoke, his voice was careful, almost hesitant- like each word was a fragile thing he wasn’t sure he wanted to let go. “The flat opposite mine... it was wasted on nothing,” he said quietly. “For months. Just empty space. No life. No meaning. I needed to fill it. Needed to watch something- *someone* - who mattered.”

Will’s gaze hardened, the edges of his voice cutting sharp and cold. “Takes an incredibly fucked-up person to fill their life by spying on someone else like that.”

James’s eyes flickered with a stubborn edge, voice low and steady. “I can put it all in the past,” he said, like offering a quiet dare. “Leave it behind. Start over.” There was something almost desperate beneath the calm- like he was trying to convince not just Will, but himself too. “But only if you’re willing to forget it.”

Will’s eyes narrowed, disbelief sharp in his tone. “Are you fucking crazy?” he snapped, voice laced with raw edge.

James’s gaze flickered, the mask slipping for a fraction- something darker surfacing beneath the calm. His jaw clenched, cold realization settling in like ice. *He’s just like everyone else.*

He changed then- subtle but unmistakable- a shadow twisting in his eyes, warning flaring beneath the surface. “Maybe I am,” he said quietly. “But at least I’m honest about it.”

Will leaned in, voice dropping into that razor-sharp, no-bullshit tone that made you want to squirm. “No, I mean *genuinely* - are you fucking crazy or something? Like, are you even right in the head?” His eyes drilled into James like he was trying to pry the truth out of that mess behind the smirk. “Because honestly? Nothing about this- *any* of this- makes sense otherwise.”

James’s bitter laugh was low and rough, eyes flashing with a cold fire. “You’re no different from anyone else,” he spat. “You don’t see how I was trying to protect you. How this twisted shit was *for you*.”

Will’s jaw clenched, voice snapping sharp as he slammed his palm on the table, raising his voice. “Protect me? By turning my life into a fucking nightmare? You’re insane, James. Pure fucking madness.”

James shot him a deadly glare, voice dropping to a razor’s edge. “You need to be a bit quieter.”

The café’s hum seemed to hush around them, the weight of their clash swallowing the space between words. Will’s eyes flicked toward the edges of the café, catching the way a few heads had turned- curious, wary. The tension between them was starting to bleed into the room like a slow poison.

He leaned in close, voice dropping to a sharp whisper just for James. “I don’t know why you’re not telling *fucking everyone* about yourself,” he hissed, eyes cold but amused. “Maybe then people would actually get what they’re dealing with.”

The smirk tugging at Will’s lips was dangerous, like he was daring James to lose control right there and then. James’s eyes darkened, the barest hint of a smirk tugging at his lips. “Maybe I *know* I’m not normal,” he said quietly, voice low and steady- like a confession wrapped in a challenge. “And maybe that’s exactly why I don’t need everyone knowing.”

He leaned back slightly, eyes never leaving Will’s, daring him to call it what it was. Will’s smirk twisted into something sharper, colder. “Not normal? Please, James. You’re not just ‘not normal’- you’re a full-blown disaster dressed up in denial.” He shook his head, voice dripping with contempt. “You’re the kind of mess people warn each other about. And honestly? I’m surprised anyone’s stuck around this long.”

James’s eyes flashed with a sharp edge as he shot back, voice low and cutting. “Then why *did* you stick around? If I’m such a disaster, why didn’t you walk away like everyone else?”

The question hung heavy, loaded- like a challenge daring Will to admit there was something more tangled between them than either wanted to face. Will’s mouth opened like he was about to say something- something soft, maybe even honest- but then the words died on his tongue. Instead, he shook his head sharply, voice hardening again. “You need help, James. Seriously. You’re fucking crazy, and no amount of pretending is gonna change that.”

James scoffed, sharp and bitter, his gaze snapping away like Will’s words burned too much to face. “Yeah, yeah,” he muttered, voice thick with sarcasm. “Crazy. Heard it all before.” He folded his arms, walling himself off, the cold armor sliding back into place.

The café's soft buzz was momentarily interrupted as a barista approached their table, tray balanced with practiced ease.

"Here you go, sir," she said with a polite smile, setting down a warm, golden toastie in front of Will.

Will's eyes flicked up briefly, nodding in thanks but his attention still tangled in the thick tension between him and James. The barista offered a small, knowing smile, then stepped back, leaving the two alone again in their charged silence.

Will's fingers twitched near the toastie, but he didn't reach for it. Instead, his eyes lingered on the golden, steaming crust like it was some strange artifact, foreign and out of place amid the heavy silence between them. James caught the hesitation, the way Will's gaze softened for just a fraction- like the world outside their tangled chaos still existed somewhere, if only barely.

The café's background noise hummed softly: the clink of cups, murmured conversations, the distant hiss of the espresso machine. But none of it touched the bubble of stillness that wrapped around their table.

Will finally muttered, almost to himself, "I forgot I even ordered that."

The words hung there, quiet but weighty, like a small surrender in the middle of their storm. James's eyes flicked up, curious despite himself, watching Will wrestle with something unspoken- something just beneath the surface.

Will let out a long, defeated sigh. His fingers finally moved, picking up the dull butter knife beside the plate with a slow, sad motion. The blade wasn't sharp enough for the job. It squeaked a little against the crisp top of the toastie, crushing instead of slicing, the cheese inside reluctantly stretching and tearing. It took effort. Annoying and unnecessary effort. Will didn't look at James as he worked, he kept his eyes on the toastie like it was demanding full concentration.

The steam curled up between the halves, warm and inviting, but his eyes stayed distant, lost in a place far from the café's cozy hum. Once they were fully detached, he paused. One half tentatively between his fingers, the other still sat on the plate.

And then- *then* - he slid the half which he wasn't already grasping, across the table.

Right toward James.

It felt like everything in the café froze. Like even the air stopped cycling. That stupid little triangle of bread sat there between them, radiating warmth, and James couldn't fucking believe it. Couldn't process it. His mind short-circuited so violently he felt it in his teeth.

This wasn't food.

This was psychological warfare.

A toastie- *a toastie* - was being used as a weapon of mass emotional confusion. And James was losing the battle. He stared at it. Then at Will. Then at it again. His jaw locked and unlocked, and his fingers twitched around thighs like he needed something to hold him here, tether him before he floated off into pure, spiralling madness. Why would Will do that? Why would he *offer* him something? Why would he *share* , after everything, after all of it, after murder and cameras and whispered threats?

Unless…

Unless it meant something.

Unless this was the crack in the ice. Unless Will, for just a second, maybe didn't hate him.

And that… that thought was so stupid, so dangerous, it nearly made James laugh out loud. Instead, he just sat there, eyes flicking down to the halved toastie like it was some glowing artefact from a dream he'd never deserved to have. Will picked up his half, slowly, and brought it to his mouth like he had all the time in the world. His eyes, though, didn't leave James for a second.

He took a bite.

Not a dainty one. Not aggressive either. Just… calm. Confident. His jaw worked through the toasted bread with a quiet crunch, and a string of melted cheddar clung to his lip for a second before snapping. He didn't wipe it. He didn't look away. He just chewed.

And stared.

Dead into James. It wasn't casual. It wasn't incidental. It was a test.

Like Will had pulled some invisible lever and now he was watching what fell apart. His gaze was hard, unreadable, as if he was cataloguing every micro-expression, every twitch, every breath James didn't take. As if he were waiting to see what James would do when offered something he didn't deserve.

James didn't reach for the toastie.

He sat there, spine stiff, locked in place by the way Will was looking at him- like prey, maybe. Or like something pathetic in a glass box. Will didn't even blink. And James… James felt like he was being *seen* in a way he hated. Not the curated version of himself. Not the charming smirk or the defensive barbs or the paranoia-sharpened intellect.

Just him.

Stripped back. Raw. Silenced by a fucking toastie and a pair of eyes that weren't looking away.

Will took another bite. James flinched as Will's foot connected sharply with his shin under the table- a swift, unceremonious jab that snapped him out of the trance he'd fallen into. He blinked, jolted, eyes darting to Will's face in bewilderment, but Will just arched an eyebrow, like *really?*

“If I didn’t want you to eat it,” Will said, voice low but now threaded with that smug little twist he knew exactly how to wield, just like before, “I wouldn’t have fucking offered it.”

James reached out- slow, hesitant fingers hovering above the offered half of toastie like it might burn him. But when his hand finally lifted, it didn’t move with that usual controlled grace. It wavered. A small, ceaseless tremor ran through it, subtle at first, but unmistakable. His fingertips twitched, and then curled slightly, like even *touching* something from Will felt like more than he deserved.

Will saw it. They both did.

The silence warped around it. That hand- *his* hand- had done unspeakable things, built shrines out of obsession, left fingerprints on secrets no one should ever know. But now it just *shook* . Pathetically. Like he was cold. Like he was afraid.

Will’s chewing slowed. The ice in his stare melted just a little. His lips parted- like he might say something- then closed again. His eyes stayed on that hand. And for a second… just a second… the sharpness behind them dulled. There was something familiar there. Something that might’ve once been called care.

Will coughed- once, sharp and awkward- before snapping his gaze away like it physically hurt to witness that moment. His eyes darted to the window, then the floor, then anywhere but James. Like the vulnerability clawing up James' throat might reach across the table and infect him too.

He adjusted how he was sitting, suddenly rigid, as if the sight of James shaking had thrown something *off* in him. Like it had scraped too close to something Will didn’t want to admit still lived in him, empathy, or worse... *attachment.*

James inhaled, slow and shaky, like the toastie in front of him was some kind of trial. He lifted it- hand still trembling- and took a bite. Just a small one. Barely a corner. The bread was warm, the cheese stringy, but swallowing it? *Hellish.*

His throat clenched around it like it wasn’t food but a fucking confession. He couldn’t get it down properly. Because *fuck.* His heart was up there, thudding in his windpipe, choking the breath from him like it wanted to crawl out and throw itself at Will’s feet.

He chewed, mechanical, all the while feeling it- *that truth.* He wasn’t in control anymore. He wasn’t behind a lens. He wasn’t orchestrating anything. A twitching bird in Will’s mouth, fragile and fluttering. Will could spit him out or bite down. And James knew, *really* knew, that whatever happened next wasn’t his decision to make.

Will watched him once again. Quiet, still, half a bite into his own half of the toastie. His gaze tracked the movement of James’ jaw, the slow chew, the way his throat visibly struggled to swallow. And that hand- still trembling like it wasn’t part of him anymore. Something detached. Something scared.

Will’s brow twitched.

It was quick. Barely there. Just a flicker of something almost human across his face, like muscle memory tugged at the corner of his mouth, as if sympathy were some involuntary tic. He ate the last of his toastie, the crust unceremoniously being swallowed down, and leaned back, exhaling through his nose.

“You can’t eat,” he said. Not a question. Not concerned, yet. Just… noticing. Then, after a beat, quieter, “It’s not poisoned. Relax.”

And yet, his body wasn’t listening.

His hand was still shaking. Trembling so finely it looked like static, like interference. He lowered it to his lap as discreetly as he could, but he knew Will saw. Of course he saw- his eyes were everywhere, raking over him like a scanner, like a searchlight. Not in awe. In study. Observation.

James swallowed nothing.

His back met the wood of the chair with a soft, deliberate thud, and still- his shoulders were drawn up like he expected a blow. Or a verdict. It clicked, then, in the worst way: this wasn’t about the toastie. It wasn’t about the café. It wasn’t even about Will having the reigns.

It was about the fact that for the first time in too long, James wasn’t in control.

Not the situation. Not the narrative. Not himself.

And his body- the thing he always kept so neatly in check, so weaponised, so ready- was betraying him. Shivering like a kicked dog. He was shivering.

And they both knew. He wasn’t cold. He was scared.

And fear… fear was dangerous. It made people reckless. Made people honest. James hated honest. He hated how small he felt under Will’s eyes. And he hated how much Will was still watching. “Stop looking at me,” James snapped, too fast, too loud. It cracked out of him like a whip, brittle and bleeding at the edges.

Will’s eyes didn't flinch, didn’t even twitch. Instead, he slowly looked around the café with a lazy sweep of his head, as if mocking how completely unbothered he could afford to be. “Thought you wanted to keep things down,” he said dryly, gesturing loosely at the room. “Y’know. Because we’re *in public* .”

James sucked in a breath through his teeth like it might steady him, but all it did was scrape along the inside of his throat. The huff he let out came weak and pathetic. He *hated* how it sounded. How *he* sounded. “I just want you to get it over with,” he muttered, voice rasping like it’d been chewed up. “Say what you want. Do what you’re gonna do. I don’t need to know how much you know. I don’t *want* to.”

There it was. The tell.

James wasn’t playing the game anymore. He was standing on the tracks, eyes shut, waiting for the train. And Will was still deciding how fast it should go.

Will's jaw tightened, and for a long moment, he clenched his eyes shut like he was battling some storm inside. It was like watching someone wrestle with a ghost- whether to hold on or finally let go. The tension in his face twisted, raw and real, before he slowly opened his eyes again. But whatever he decided in that quiet battle, it was clear: the question of whether he still cared about James wasn't settled yet.

Will's voice dropped, quieter than before, almost hesitant- like he was stepping onto thin ice. "Can I ask you a serious question?"

His eyes locked onto James's, searching- maybe for an answer, maybe for a crack. Either way, the moment hung heavy between them, fragile as glass. James swallowed hard, throat tight like sandpaper, then gave a slow, barely-there nod.

Will's eyes sharpened, voice steady but probing. "Do you have anyone else? Anyone besides me?"

The question landed like a stone in the quiet, raw and unavoidable. James's hands clenched into fists on his lap, fingers digging shallow crescent moons into his skin as if trying to anchor himself to something solid. His shoulders tensed, rising slightly like a shield against an invisible threat. He avoided Will's gaze, eyes flickering down to the worn edge of the table, tracing invisible cracks in the wood with a nervous finger. His leg bounced- once, twice, then thrice- in uneven, staccato rhythms that betrayed the calm mask he tried to wear. His jaw twitched, tight and restless, lips pressed into a thin line that barely concealed the turmoil beneath. The quiet in the café seemed to press in on him, suffocating, magnifying the silence between them. When he finally did look up, his eyes were shadowed and guarded, reflecting a truth he wasn't ready to say aloud: he didn't have anyone else. Not really. Not who mattered. And admitting it, even in this small, fractured moment, felt like stepping into a spotlight that burned too bright.

James didn't lift his eyes when he spoke. His voice came out quieter than expected, low and threadbare. "No. There's no one else. There hasn't been." A bitter little smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, but it didn't reach his eyes. "If I've lost you now… I'm done with it all."

Will stilled. His grip on his drink slackened slightly, and his eyes narrowed, searching James' expression like it was a code to be cracked. "What do you mean- 'with it all'?" he asked, slowly, cautiously, like the answer might explode if he pushed too hard.

James blinked slowly, something flinching behind his eyes. For once- somehow, inexplicably- he didn't want to manipulate Will. Not this time. Not anymore. He didn't want to dangle his pain like bait, didn't want to tighten the rope of guilt around Will's neck and watch him choke on it.

So he looked away. Shrugged, like it didn't matter. Like *he* didn't matter.

"Nothing. Forget it," he muttered, voice brittle. "Just talking shit." He waved a hand, dismissive and hollow, trying to fold the moment in half and toss it under the table like it hadn't just cost him something real. Under the table, Will shifted. His legs moved forward, then sideways- then suddenly, both his ankles wrapped around James' beneath the table,

locking them together in a quiet tether. A message passed not through words, but through pressure and warmth and intention.

Don't spiral. You're not alone. Not yet.

James froze, the contact short-circuiting his brain. He could barely breathe, could barely *think* , when Will had just reached out like that. Will exhaled sharply, his voice a brutal contrast to the softness of his legs twining around James'. "I should go to the fucking police," he muttered, almost casually, like he was reminding himself. "You're a fucking voyeur, among other things."

James swallowed. Hard. His throat clicked audibly. But Will didn't move his legs. Not an inch.

Will narrowed his eyes, his head tilting just slightly to the side. He was studying James again, like he was a puzzle with one corner piece missing, so close to being complete, yet still off enough to unsettle. Then, coolly, like it was just a thought drifting by, he murmured, "But for some reason, I feel like you're going to sort everything out yourself."

James blinked, tense. His hands were wrapped awkwardly around the crust of the toastie, barely held together. His brow furrowed. "…What does that mean?" he asked, wary, voice tight like he was preparing for a trap.

And Will just stared back at him- like maybe *he* wasn't sure yet either. He leaned forward, elbows resting on the table, his half-eaten toastie momentarily forgotten. His voice dropped, almost gentle, but not quite. "It means," he said slowly, eyes locking with James', "I think you're the kind of person who'll set fire to his own life before letting anyone else clean up the mess."

He let that hang in the air, heavy and cutting. His gaze didn't waver. "Am I wrong?"

James didn't move for a second. His hands hovered near the table, knuckles pale from the strain. Then, quietly- more breath than voice- he said, "No."

He blinked once, slowly, like it took effort. His throat flexed in a hard swallow. "You're not wrong," he murmured, with a twisted, bitter sort of smile. "I've always preferred to pull the trigger myself." His gaze dropped to the toastie again, now half-eaten and forgotten. "At least then I get to decide where the bullet lands."

But-

James froze. His expression crumpled, his brows knitting so tightly it looked almost painful. "Wait- Will-" his voice cracked halfway through, some breathless, bewildered pitch overtaking him, "are you telling me to fucking kill myself?"

His eyes searched Will's face like he was trying to translate it, like he wasn't sure if he'd just been handed a riddle or a sentence. A flicker of something scared and raw passed through him, splintering his otherwise sharp exterior. And somewhere under the table, his knee bounced once, like his body needed to move the panic somewhere.

Will jerked back an inch like he'd just been slapped, his expression screwing up in disgusted disbelief. “What? James- no. God, *no* ,” he said sharply, shaking his head as if the very thought made his skin crawl.

His voice had that stunned edge now, almost offended by the implication. “Jesus. I’m not *you* . I don’t go around planting suicidal fucking riddles into conversations like it's poetry. I meant-” he cut himself off, huffing, dragging a hand down his face. “Forget it. You’re spiralling again.”

He leaned back slightly, gaze narrowing. “I’m not asking you to disappear. I'm asking what you're actually going to do now. With *yourself* . With all this.” His hand gestured vaguely, toward James, toward the mess, toward everything they'd created and broken and pretended wasn’t bleeding in front of them.

James frowned into his lap, his gaze caught in the tangled mess of his own trembling hands. His throat felt too tight, his mind ticking too fast- chaotic static blurring what was real and what he’d already convinced himself of. Why wasn’t that what Will meant? Why wasn’t that the obvious answer? That James should just disappear, just leave, just remove himself from the equation- like a problem solved with subtraction. That would’ve made sense. That would’ve *fit* . It was the ending he'd written for himself a long time ago, like a script etched into his brain with a blunt knife. Because people didn’t stay. They didn’t forgive. They didn’t hold your fucking ankles under the table. They locked their doors. They changed their numbers. They spat your name like it was poison and they watched you *leave* . So why wasn’t Will doing that? Why wasn't Will spitting venom or walking out or- anything that made sense?

Wasn't that what he wanted?

Wasn’t that what they *all* wanted?

He blinked down at his hands, as if expecting them to vanish, too.

Then Will’s voice cut through the fog- sharp, frustrated, *real* . “James,” he said, low but firm, “I’m not *them* . Or *him* . Or *her* . Or whoever the fuck else scrambled your head into a Rubik’s cube. Don’t put their shit on me.”

Will’s eyes didn’t flinch when James looked up, like he was daring him to keep assuming the worst.

James’s mouth parted before the words even formed, like they’d been sitting there for years, waiting for the right moment to slip out with all the grace of a drowning man. “Sorry,” he muttered, his voice uneven and embarrassingly raw. He blinked too fast, like that would stop whatever emotion was trying to claw its way out through his eyes. “It’s just…” He let out a breath and shook his head, eyes darting away from Will’s face, like he couldn’t bear to see the disgust he was *sure* was coming. “It seemed like the obvious answer.”

He didn’t mean it to be dramatic. He wasn’t fishing. It wasn’t a trap. It was just the truth. Cold and simple. The kind of truth that lived in the bones. Because in his world, that *was* the obvious answer. People didn’t sit across from him and tether him down with their ankles and

say they weren't going to run. They burned bridges and threw up walls and *left* . And James had learned to open the door for them when they did.

Will exhaled sharply, the sound more of a scoff than a breath- like he couldn't believe himself, couldn't quite stomach the fact that even now, *even now* , he still gave a fuck. His eyes drifted over James, narrowing at the sheer wreck of him. "Jesus Christ," he muttered under his breath, not with malice, but with that same exhausted disbelief you reserve for people who've hurt you and still somehow manage to look like the ones bleeding.

He ran a hand down his face, dragging the pads of his fingers across his lips like he was wiping away the impulse to care. "I think…" he said slowly, words sticking like gum to the roof of his mouth, "we need some fucking air." His voice was quiet, and sure, and certainly not a question. Not an offer. Just a fact. Like they'd both suffocate if they stayed at that table a second longer.

They stood up in unison, the scrape of chairs loud against the café floor, heads briefly turning their way before quickly looking back down. James kept his eyes trained on the floor, on Will's ankles- the same ones that had just been wrapped around his own like a noose or a lifeline. He wasn't sure which.

Will didn't wait for him. He was already heading for the door, pushing it open with one palm and stepping out into the brittle daylight like it wasn't crushing him. James followed, that stupid half of a toastie still sitting in his gut like lead.

Outside, the noise of the city felt too sharp, the colours too saturated. People passed. Cars rolled. Life went on. And they just stood there. On the pavement. Two feet apart. Will shoved his hands into his jacket pockets. James folded his arms across his chest like he was bracing for weather that hadn't arrived. Neither of them moved. There was no next plan. No natural step forward. It was like reaching the edge of a board game and realising you'd lost the instructions.

"Okay," Will muttered, glancing sideways.

"Okay," James echoed, his voice brittle.

Neither of them knew where the hell they were supposed to go now. James shifted awkwardly, gaze flicking from the pavement to the sky like maybe the answer would be written there, scribbled between the clouds. His jaw worked, clenched once, then loosened. Then, quietly- like it wouldn't shatter the fragile silence already hanging between them- he said:

"…Do you wanna come back to mine?"

Will blinked. Once. Twice. His head turned so slowly it was borderline cinematic. "I'm sorry- what?"

James shrugged like it was casual. Like this wasn't possibly the most insane suggestion to have ever fallen out of his mouth. "Just… if you want. To talk. Or- whatever."

Will just stared. Slack-jawed. Gobsmacked. “Back to *yours* ?” he repeated, like he was testing the words out loud to see if they sounded less deranged with air behind them. “You- you literally *stalked* me. You installed *cameras* in my home. And now you wanna grab a cuppa and debrief in your creepy little lair like we’re doing a fucking post-episode breakdown?”

James flinched, barely. But he didn’t take it back. His eyes were already on the cracks in the pavement again, like he was trying to disappear between them. Will huffed, stunned. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

It hit James all at once. The street noise swelling into a tide- honking cars, a distant siren, a dog barking, someone laughing far too loudly. The scrape of shoes on concrete. Will’s words still echoing, sharper than any of it. *Creepy little lair. Cameras. Stalked.* The sheer weight of it pressed down on his skull like it might crush him clean through. His breath caught in his throat. His ears buzzed. Will’s face blurred at the edges as if James’ brain couldn’t process it fast enough. The world tilted. Too loud. Too bright. Too much. The colours were wrong. The smells were wrong. Even the air felt *wrong* , like it was pushing against his skin instead of settling into his lungs. He blinked fast, his vision swimming. His hands twitched at his sides- fists, then open, then fists again- like he didn’t know what they were supposed to be doing. The collar of his shirt was too tight. His jaw ached from clenching. He couldn’t hear anything anymore except the static. The fucking *static* .

“ *I’M SORRY!* ”

It tore out of him like something being exorcised. Too loud. Too sharp. Raw and ugly and *real* .

Will jolted. An aggressive full-body flinch which had him take a sudden jump to the side. He stared at James with wide eyes, like he’d just watched a statue start sobbing. James stood there, shoulders hunched like a kicked dog, chest rising and falling like he’d just run for his life. His voice never did that. He *never* said that. Not even once.

Will didn’t even know what to say. Because that *wasn’t* James.

James couldn’t handle the look on Will’s face. That wide-eyed, open-mouthed kind of shock that made James feel like some broken thing on display. A failed experiment. A monster that just said *sorry* and now expected applause. The shame scalded him. *Too much. Too fast. Too loud.*

He turned and *bolted* .

Not a full sprint- just the kind of brisk, frantic pace that made it clear he was fleeing. Shoulders hunched, hands clenched, almost jogging as he stormed down the pavement like if he moved fast enough he could outrun whatever he’d just let out. The air slapped his face. Street sounds blurred into white noise. The city became a smear of colours and voices and smells, all too loud, too much, pressing against his skin.

He needed Otto. He needed soft fur between his fingers. He needed the perch of the windowsill. He needed something *normal* , something *his* , something that didn’t *look* at him

like that.

Behind him- *of course* - Will's voice cut through the static.

"James- *James!* Wait-"

James didn't turn. He weaved through the crowd like his bones might shatter if he stopped, shoving past a man in a suit, ducking around a woman with a pram. A shoulder hit his arm but he didn't flinch, didn't look up. Just kept walking like his flat was the only place left on Earth. But he could hear it. The hurried steps. The people muttering as Will tried to follow, weaving between the late morning pedestrians, muttering *"Sorry- excuse me- James, just stop-"*

James couldn't. Wouldn't. He needed the safety of his space, his things, the stillness he *controlled* . Not Will's face. Not Will's pity. Not the stunned silence or whatever cruel tenderness might be lurking behind it. He just needed out.

The air shifted the moment they hit the path between their buildings- wide, open, dead-centre neutral ground. The wind curled between the walls like it knew. Like even the weather paused to see which way this would go.

James didn't stop. Didn't even glance at Will as the footsteps drew closer. Didn't care that the path was the space *between* their lives, not part of either. He kept walking like his body was trying to outrun his own skin.

But Will caught up. His hand slammed onto James' shoulder- hot, angry fingers curling tight- and then *yanked* .

Hard.

James spun, staggered like a puppet ripped by its strings. His heel scuffed the concrete, breath snatched from his lungs, and just like that- he was facing him.

Will.

Right there. Eyes blazing. Jaw set. Chest heaving like he'd chased him through fire.

James froze. White noise crashed in his ears. His hands twitched at his sides like they didn't know what they were supposed to do now that they weren't pushing people away. He blinked, once, twice, staring into that furious, beautiful face. They stood there- perfectly even. One building looming behind each of them. A line drawn in silence. A war paused mid-beat.

And James didn't dare move first.

Will *exploded* .

" *Are you fucking kidding me?* " His voice *ripped* through the air like a blade, sharp enough to make two pigeons nearby take off. "You think you can just storm off like some tortured little soul every time shit gets real? You think that's going to *fix* anything?"

James flinched, just barely, but Will caught it, and he *pounced* . “Stop *running away* , James! Stop playing the broken little boy who gets to do fucked up things and then disappear when someone *dares* to make you look at yourself! You don’t get to control everything and then *opt out* when people don’t clap for you anymore!”

James opened his mouth, stunned, breath catching like it had something to say and then lost it halfway up his throat. But Will wasn’t finished. Oh, not even close. He took a step forward, jabbing a finger into James’ chest with enough force to *rock* him back. “You *followed* me. You *watched* me. You lied to me for *months* - and now I’m here, still fucking trying- and you what? You *run* ? Again? You keep bolting like the moment someone sees the rot in you, it’s game over. You think I haven’t *seen* it? I live in it now!”

James’ lips parted, eyes wide, trembling in some mix of fear and awe. He looked like a man being held at gunpoint by someone who used to tuck him in at night. Will dropped his hand, panting.

“You don’t get to just fucking *leave* every time the consequences of your actions crawl out of your perfect little notebook. *Stand still* , James. *Grow up.* ”

His voice broke at the end- not out of weakness. Out of *rage* . Out of grief. Out of being the only one still fighting like any of this was salvageable. Will was in full swing now, his voice cracking with venom and heat and *weeks* of pent-up chaos.

“You *always* do this, James!” he barked, stepping into his space, pointing an accusatory finger right at his chest once again. “You fuck everything up and then *run* ! Like a coward!”

James didn’t move. He didn’t speak. He didn’t even blink.

But something was happening.

With every word spat, something in his body caved further in. Subtle at first: the twitch of a muscle near his eye, a shiver threading up his neck like cold breath. Then his shoulders started to stiffen, higher and higher, defensively close to his ears. Will didn’t see it. Not at first. He was too far gone, voice rising like a wave seconds before the crash.

“Do you even *hear* yourself when you talk? You lie and lie and lie, and you act like you *love* people, like you *care* -”

Each word sliced, and with each slice James’ vision flared- flashed.

Get your fucking act together, you FREAK!
You’re such a disappointment.
I said SPEAK when you’re spoken to!

YOU make me do this.

They weren’t Will’s words anymore. They were old ones. And they were *louder* . The flash of a belt. The cracked roar of “ *You little shit, don’t you walk away from me!* ” The way his

mother always looked down at her feet when it happened. The stinging hot red across his cheek that felt like it was *still there* .

The air became too tight to breathe. His skin itched. His hands clenched by his sides- not in anger, but to stop himself from trembling. But even that was a losing battle. His knees locked. His throat clicked dry. Will was still yelling. Still not seeing.

“You think people owe you *anything* after everything you did? You think I’m just going to sit there while you sit in your little glass castle watching me like a- like some *creep* -”

And then Will did it.

He raised his hand.

Not to strike, not even close- Just to gesture. To throw emphasis behind his words. To punctuate the sentence, to dramatise the rage.

James *flinched* .

Violently.

Like the air itself had struck him. Like the sky had split and he was bracing for the blow. His whole body jerked with it. Head ducking. Shoulders coiled. Hands curled so tightly they shook.

He didn't yell. He didn’t defend himself. He just *froze* .

As if the best-case scenario was staying perfectly still. As if movement would only make it worse. As if he knew- *knew* - how this went.

Will’s voice died. Immediately. He blinked, stunned, the anger ripped from his throat in one clean motion.

“James…?” he said, quietly now.

But James didn’t answer. His eyes were still straight ahead. His lips pressed thin, jaw tight. But his body… it spoke volumes. Will watched the moment crash down. All the fury drained from him like bathwater circling the plug. The raised hand fell to his side. Useless. Heavy.

What the fuck had he just done?

Will stepped forward- slowly, cautiously now- like approaching a wounded animal with a thorn still stuck in its paw. His anger had curdled into something sour, and then something sickening. Guilt bloomed under his ribs. Shame curled tight in his gut. He let out a low, broken hum, almost a sigh, as his hands reached out and wrapped around James' trembling frame. There was no hesitation in the hug- no pat or polite press of arms. He squeezed. Tightly. Fully. Like he *knew* . Like he *felt* it, bone-deep, that James needed something *real* to pull him out of whatever horror he’d just sunken into.

James didn't hug back. Not at first. His arms stayed trapped between them, his hands limp at Will's chest like they didn't know what to do. His chin dropped, forehead pressing lightly against Will's shoulder. He was still too stiff, like he was waiting for the moment to shatter.

Then a sound. Barely a sound. A threadbare rasp. "...sorry..."

It cracked. Not from volume, but from pain.

"...sorry... sorry..."

Again. Again. His voice broke more each time. Crumbled like burnt paper. He wasn't saying it to manipulate now. He wasn't saying it to earn anything. He was just saying it because it was all he had left.

"Sorry... I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm-"

Will pressed a hand to the back of his head and pulled him in tighter. As if he could press those apologies shut. As if he could hug the rot out of his lungs. He shut his eyes and swallowed hard. James' breath hitched against him. Wet. Raw.

James felt it, all at once- the unbearable truth that curled around his ribs like a vice: *this* was it. Not a new beginning. Not forgiveness. Not a second chance, a third, a fourth- Just… the end. The real one. No cliffhangers. No camera fades. This was an apology, not a tactic. Not a stepping stone toward redemption. Just a limp offering at the feet of someone who had every right to walk away. This was where their story stopped. Not in fire. Not in fury. But in a silence so loud it made his ears ring.

His shaking hands- trembling like leaves in a dying storm- clutched desperately at Will's shirt. Fisted the fabric like he could stitch himself into it. Like if he held tight enough, Will might not disappear.

But that wasn't how endings worked. And James- god, James finally understood that.

His throat ached, raw and dry and scorched from inside out. He let out a whisper. Barely a sound. Just a name. One word, like a funeral bell: "…Will."

Like it tasted bittersweet on his tongue. Like he was saying it for the last time. Like he already missed him.

James felt it. The slow, deliberate inhale- Will's breath dragging in deep through his nose, right against the crook of James' neck. Like he was trying to memorise the scent of him. Hold it inside for a moment longer. Maybe forever. It wasn't forgiveness. It wasn't a kiss. It was grief in its most intimate form. *God* , it shattered something.

Because James knew what that breath meant. He *knew* . Will wanted to keep him. Just for a second more. Maybe for always, in some impossibly naïve world. But he *couldn't* . He *shouldn't* . Because-

Because James had killed his best friend. Because James had watched Will breathe from a dozen silent angles without ever once asking if he was allowed to. Because James wasn't just

broken- he was shattered glass. The kind you bleed from long after you've swept it up.

And Will was inhaling like he was bracing himself. Like letting go would *hurt* . Like keeping James any longer might *kill him* .

James didn't even realise he was crying until the wet heat of it slid down past his jaw, soaking into Will's collar. Not gentle, pretty tears- these were ugly. *Raw.* His whole body trembled with it, like something poisonous had finally broken loose inside him and was clawing its way out through his throat.

His chest shuddered, breath hitching, muscles locking in place like he was trying not to dissolve entirely in Will's arms. His grip on the fabric of Will's shirt tightened- *desperate* now- clinging not to a person, but to the last shred of a life he'd already destroyed.

"I love you," he choked out, barely audible. The words fell out broken, slurred like something spat through blood and regret. "I- I love you…"

It was small. *So* small. Like the last flare of a dying match. Like a prayer whispered through glass. Will went completely still.

His arms didn't drop, not yet. But something in them did. The warmth drained out slowly, like watching someone disappear behind their own eyes. And when he finally spoke, his voice was fractured. Barely holding together. "No," he whispered. "James… you don't love me."

James' mouth parted. No sound came out.

He just stood there. Hollow. Unglued. Like the scaffolding that held him up had collapsed in an instant, and now all that was left was trembling muscle and grief.

Will didn't say anything else.

He slowly, *so slowly* , unhooked James' hands from his shirt. One finger at a time. Like peeling off a memory that had stuck too long. And when James instinctively tried to hold on, Will gently pushed his hands away.

Final.

That was the worst part. Not the shouting. Not the crying.

The quiet.

Will took a step back. And then another. James didn't follow. His knees were locked, his throat raw, his face wet. He just stood there watching Will walk away, to his own flat. Not James'.

No glance back. No final words.

Just the sound of shoes against pavement and the summer air that tasted suddenly like the end of the world. James stood in the dead centre of the path, between their two buildings,

shaking- until the echo of Will's footsteps vanished completely.

He sank to his knees.

Because there was nothing else to do.

Not anymore.

IIIII

The park was a skeleton of itself at night.

Gone were the shrieks of children, the clatter of bikes, the chatter of passing strangers. In their place: stillness. The kind that creeps up your spine and nestles behind your ears. The kind that makes you feel like the last living thing in a world that finally gave up.

James sat on the bench. His bench.

The one he'd watched Will from all those months ago, back when obsession still felt like admiration, when fantasy still felt harmless. Back when he believed he could just *watch* and it wouldn't destroy him. The air was heavy. Damp with that urban chill that seeps into your clothes and settles under your skin. Streetlights buzzed softly in the distance, their glow casting long, sickly shadows over the path. The trees stood like witnesses, skeletal arms stretching skyward, leaves barely clinging on.

Somewhere behind him, a fox screamed- a sharp, jarring sound that sliced through the quiet like a warning. But James didn't flinch. He just sat there, hunched forward, elbows on knees, hands clasped like he was praying. But he wasn't praying.

There was no one left to pray to.

Only the dark. And the weight of everything.

His fingers were raw from clenching. His eyes red. His face puffy. Ugly. He'd long stopped caring how he looked. Vanity had burned up somewhere in the wreckage of Will's expression when he'd said, *"You don't love me."*

Now there was just this. Cold metal under his thighs. Damp air in his lungs. The city stretching out like a graveyard of all his mistakes. And not a single soul in sight. A statue carved from regret.

His breath came slow, as if each inhale was weighed down by something ancient and cruel. He could hear it- the faint rattle at the back of his throat, the way it scraped the roof of his mouth like sandpaper. His jaw ached from clenching. His tongue sat heavy behind his teeth. A breeze tugged at the hem of his coat, and he let it.

A single leaf skittered across the path in front of him, spiralling like it was trying to escape. It failed. It hit the edge of the curb and lay there- pathetic. Flattened.

Behind him, the faint groan of the city pulsed- car tyres somewhere far off, a shutter slamming down, the crackle of a distant train track. But here, on this bench, in this park, it was vacuum silence. Like the universe was holding its breath, waiting to see what he'd do next. Or maybe waiting to see if he'd do *anything* at all.

His legs twitched. Muscles hot and cold all at once. His palms stung from where his nails had dug into them earlier. He flexed them now, just to feel something. The bench creaked as he

shifted slightly.

He lowered his gaze to the gravel path. It stretched ahead in a soft curve, vanishing into the dark between the trees. His shadow, cast long by a nearby lamppost, looked thinner than usual. Fragile. Like it could tear.

A faint rustle, barely there- soft, cautious, like footsteps on old paper. James lifted his head slowly, lids heavy, lashes wet and stinging. His body didn't jolt, didn't brace. It was too tired to care. But his eyes did. They focused.

Standing just at the edge of the tree line, framed in the amber spill of the streetlamp, thin legs braced in the gravel, ribs tight beneath russet fur, tail low and dragging like a shadow stitched to its body.

A fox.

But not *his* fox.

Not the baby he'd scooped from the undergrowth, limp and breathless. Not the little one who'd been flung into the lake like waste. No, this one was *older* - seasoned. Scarred. Its coat was dulled in patches, a hint of grey biting at its cheeks, its eyes too big for its face, black and glassy with a sheen of something familiar.

It didn't move.

Neither did he.

James held its stare, his fingers curling against the bench like he might splinter the wood. Something churned in his chest- not grief, not exactly. Something too exhausted for rage. Too broken for longing. The fox's ears twitched, but it held still. He thought, absurdly, that maybe it was here to take him. That maybe it had come back after all these years- reborn and silent- to lead him somewhere he deserved to go.

The animal blinked slowly. Deliberately. And then it sat.

Right there. As if it would wait. As if it had *time* .

James felt something shift behind his ribs. Not healing. But understanding. Something primal. Like prey recognising another injured thing. Like something old in his blood sighing. The moment sat between them like an old, fragile book- its spine cracked, pages yellowed, but still legible. And in that breathless hush, James felt like one of those pages. Torn at the edges. Scribbled over by careless hands. But *still there* . Still holding the story.

The fox was the margin note in ink faded by weather- barely decipherable, but stubbornly present. A reminder. A quiet nudge that even the ruined parts were *readable* . That even the things cast aside could be *remembered* . They sat, him and the fox, like two ghosts who had once been boys. Like two chapters that never should've met, but somehow belonged on the same page anyway.

James's voice cracked like dry twigs snapping in the wind as he broke the silence, whispering, "He's gone... he's moved out." His words hung fragile and raw in the cool night air, as if saying them aloud might shatter whatever thread was left.

He glanced down at the fox- those dark, unblinking eyes reflecting the streetlamp's glow- and, voice ragged and bitter, muttered, "So you can stop mocking me now."

Because in that moment, the fox wasn't just an animal. It was everything he couldn't face: the judgment, the pain, the truth carved deep into his skin. And now, maybe, it could finally rest. James dipped his head, the weight of the night pressing down like an anchor.

In that fragile pause, his mind slammed into the raw, jagged memory- watching Will lift those boxes, one after another, back into the cold metal belly of the moving van. The same van that had started it all. The same van that packed away everything they'd built, everything left unsaid, everything broken beyond repair.

He remembered the way Will's hands trembled just slightly as he closed the door, the faint catch in his breath like he was swallowing a storm. The hollow click as the latch sealed their past away.

And James- helpless, silent- had felt the ground crumble beneath him, the end of something too big to name yet too real to deny. The devastating weight of loss, heavier than any apology, heavier than any fury.

The memory burned behind his eyes, scorching, impossible to look away from. The fox hadn't moved. Still as a statue. Eyes gleaming amber in the dark like ancient coals, like it had waited years for this exact moment. It stood with its ribs showing through its coat- lean, haunted, spectral. A creature carved from loss. A sentinel of the past.

And James realised, with a stuttering breath, that the fox wasn't mocking him.

It *was* him.

Now it the boy he used to be. Not the man he tried to become. But this- this fractured thing surviving the wreckage. The fox hadn't come to haunt him. It had come to witness the ending.

And with one silent turn of its head, the fox slinked into the woods- disappearing like a secret never meant to be told. And the night held its breath, as if even the darkness couldn't bear to look at him anymore.

Epilogue

The soft clink of a spoon echoed through the kitchen as James stirred his tea, slow and methodical. Morning light spilled across the tiles in quiet slants, catching the steam as it rose in gentle spirals.

Once satisfied, he tapped the spoon once against the rim, then dropped it into the sink behind him with a muted clatter. It echoed for a moment, then faded into the hush of the flat. James turned and leaned forward onto the counter, both palms braced on the cool surface, his mug resting between them. He exhaled through his nose- almost a sigh, almost a hum- and glanced down.

Otto had slinked in at some point, silent as ever, curling himself into a familiar spot by James' mug. Without looking, James' fingers grazed the cat's soft fur in slow, absent strokes.

"Morning," he murmured, voice low and content. "Sleep alright?"

Otto responded with a purr, low and steady. James smiled. Outside, the world moved quietly. A bird landed on the windowsill. A car started on the street. The kettle had long since stopped whistling. And James- for once- didn't need anything at all.

The warmth from the mug seeped into his palms as he stood there, unmoving, letting the silence drape itself over him like an old cardigan. Otto nudged his head into James' hand, insistent, a soft bump of fur and bone. The touch pulled a quiet chuckle from James' chest- barely more than breath.

He shifted his hand automatically, obliging. Fingers raked gently behind Otto's ears, stroking with the kind of practised affection that came from years of repetition. The cat leaned into it, eyes half-lidded, rumbling with approval. "Alright, alright," James murmured, the corner of his mouth twitching. "Needier than me this morning."

His voice didn't carry far. It never did anymore. But in the hush of the kitchen, even that whisper felt full. Somewhere outside, a bus hissed at a stop. The radiator ticked in protest. And James... simply stood there, hands warm, tea untouched, cat purring like a motor left running.

From somewhere beyond the window, the soft squeak of brakes broke the morning stillness- a slow, drawn-out sound, like an old van pulling to a stop just a little too hard. James didn't look up. He'd heard it. Registered it. But it didn't stir anything in him. Not curiosity, not alarm. Just… noise. The outside world doing what it did best: moving along without him.

Instead, he looked down. Otto had shifted, sitting up now, staring at him with round, glassy eyes- unblinking, almost comically wide. His tail flicked once, slow and lazy, but those eyes stayed locked on James like he'd just said something unspeakable.

James raised an eyebrow. “What?” he asked softly, with a tired sort of amusement. “You know something I don’t?”

Otto didn’t answer, obviously. But he didn’t blink, either. James took another sip of tea. The cat broke the stare first, turning without a sound and padding across the kitchen tiles. His movements were fluid, precise- each step deliberate, tail high with feline indifference.

James didn’t stop him. Just watched as the cat made his way to the windowsill and, with a soft rustle of fur and muscle, leapt up in one clean, perfect motion. He landed silently.

Otto’s body shifted low, paws pressed to the wooden ledge as he peered down through the glass, head tilting ever so slightly. Focused. Intent. James smiled into his mug. “Graceful little show-off,” he muttered, voice edged with fondness.

He took another sip of tea, the warmth spreading slow and steady through his chest. Still, he didn’t move to follow Otto’s gaze. He let the cat do the watching today. Outside, something shifted- a door creaked, distant voices murmured- but James stayed where he was. His morning was here. With the tea. With the cat. With the quiet.

Otto remained perfectly still on the windowsill, save for the occasional twitch of his ears. His tail curled neatly around his paws as he stared through the glass, head tilting slightly as if he were trying to puzzle something out.

Then came the softest meow- more a breath than a sound. High and brief. Questioning.

James glanced at him, but didn’t follow his gaze. He leaned forward instead, reaching to brush a few loose strands of fur off the edge of the counter where Otto had leapt. The pale hairs floated lazily to the floor, catching the morning light like dust motes. “You’re shedding again,” James muttered under his breath. “Going to need to vacuum. Again.”

He said it like someone who *liked* the inconvenience. Like someone who had built a life around the small rituals of existence. The ones that made things feel *real* . Predictable. Safe.

Otto meowed again, a little louder this time. Still, James didn’t look up. “What is it?” he asked idly, wiping his fingers on the hem of his sleeve. “Postman? Clouds? Another pigeon looking for a fight?”

He wasn’t expecting an answer. Otto’s tail thumped once against the windowsill.

Otto stayed quiet after that, but he didn’t stay still. He crept a few steps along the sill, his paws placed delicately, silently, like he was stalking something just out of reach. His body lowered into a crouch, eyes fixed and ears forward- completely locked onto whatever was happening below.

James didn’t notice at first. He rinsed a plate in the sink, absently, running a hand through his hair as he yawned. Everything in his posture was soft, loose- unbothered. “Honestly, Otto,” he muttered, drying the plate with a towel, “you’d think you’d seen a ghost the way you’re carrying on.”

He glanced over at the cat again, still not following his gaze.

Otto's tail flicked once- twice. His head moved in small, precise motions, following something that James still refused to acknowledge. Only then did something in James' chest tighten. Not panic. Not even dread. Just a pinprick of *curiosity* . He put the plate away and went back to the counter, taking a slow sip of tea.

James exhaled through his nose, a quiet breath that was almost a laugh. He set the mug back on the counter with a soft clink, fingertips lingering on the rim for a moment, reluctant to leave the warmth. Then he straightened, brushing his palms slowly against the sides of his jumper as he lifted his head.

The flat around him was clean. *Purposefully* so. Everything in its place. The armchair angled just right toward the bookcase, a blanket folded with military precision over the backrest. A single book lay facedown on the coffee table—half-read, untouched in days. No clutter. No chaos. Just calm.

The kitchen bled gently into the living space, a soft divide marked only by the shift in flooring- from tile to carpet- and the pale light filtering in through the sheer curtains. The scent of tea still lingered in the air, faint and herbal.

He moved slowly, quietly, bare feet whispering across the floorboards as he crossed to where Otto was perched. The cat didn't acknowledge him, still frozen in place on the windowsill, every muscle honed toward the outside world. James tilted his head.

"Alright," he murmured, voice low, indulgent, like he was humouring a child. "What's got your whiskers in a twist now?"

He stepped up beside him, placing one hand lightly on the window frame as he let his gaze follow Otto's. At first, he saw nothing. Just the usual stretch of pavement, damp with last night's rain. Rows of parked cars. Empty windows. A discarded takeaway bag tumbling lazily in the breeze. The glass was cool under his touch, kissed with a faint mist from the contrast of indoor heat and the sluggish morning outside. He followed Otto's gaze with a soft squint, humour still tugging at the edge of his mouth- until he saw it.

A van, parked directly across the street. Its hazard lights blinked faintly in the gloom, like a pulse. One of the back doors hung open, rocking a little with the breeze. And that's when it hit him. That *tightening* in his chest- not panic. Not even nostalgia. Just… displacement. Like a chair had been pulled out from under him mid-sit, and his body still hadn't caught up with the fall.

His eyes flicked upward. Higher.

The flat.

Will's flat.

Empty now.

The curtains were drawn back, revealing nothing but the raw bones of the place- bare walls, pale light, no shadows moving behind the glass. He couldn't stop the flicker of expectation, like maybe- *maybe* - he'd see Will pass by the window with a cup of tea or toss a hoodie over his shoulder. The same rhythm he'd learned by heart once.

But there was nothing. Just stillness. Just space. He exhaled slowly, barely a sound. The corner of his mouth twitched. Not quite a smile. Not quite grief. Something between muscle memory and surrender. James watched the empty windows across the street like they might blink first.

He hated it.

Not in a loud way. Not with anger. But with that quiet, gnawing sort of disdain one reserves for vacant hotel rooms and forgotten train stations. Places that should be *full* - of motion, of sound, of living, breathing evidence that *someone* is home.

That flat had once *hummed* . It had been a pulse across the street, ticking just out of reach. There were nights he remembered its lights turning on before his. Mornings where steam curled against its windows like secrets. Even when Will was silent, that space had spoken. The way shadows shifted behind curtains. The colour of his laundry drying by the window. The plants that died and got replaced, again and again.

Now, it was hollow.

All the warmth gutted, scrubbed from the floorboards, as if none of it had ever happened. James felt the weight of it settle in his chest, not sharp. Just *dull* . A muted sort of ache. Like pressing a bruise that's almost healed, just to remember the shape of it.

Life was moving on. His eyes were still fixed on the dead window when it happened.

A flicker. Just there- in the corner of the flat. A shape. Motion.

James froze.

No. He saw that. He knows he did.

He stepped closer, movements fluid but weighted, as if gravity had thickened. Otto chirped beside him, but James didn't even glance down. His attention was already narrowing, tunnelling, locked onto the window like a predator catching the shimmer of fur through leaves. He pressed a palm to the glass. The chill met his skin instantly, but he didn't flinch. He leaned in, forehead almost brushing the pane. Breath fogged a small patch in front of his lips, and still he watched- *waiting* .

There. Again.

Movement.

A figure crossing behind the window. Just a blur. A shoulder, maybe. The swing of an arm. Too distant to make out clearly. But enough to make something *vile* uncoil inside him. That

awful, lurching *curiosity* - the one he'd gutted and buried and pretended to forget. It surged now, thick and sweet as honey.

His heart beat faster. Not in panic. In something far worse.

His eyes drank in every new shadow that moved within the frame. Every flicker of life that now dared occupy *that* space- *his* view. The view he'd memorised, *romanticised* , poisoned with every ounce of his obsession.

And now it belonged to someone else.

Someone who didn't know. Didn't understand. Didn't realise what it meant to be *watched from here* .

James inhaled through his nose, slow and sharp. Not quite smiling. Not quite breathing. Just *consuming* . He told himself he wasn't interested. That he'd moved on. That this- *whatever this was* - wasn't *that* again.

But his palm stayed pressed against the glass.

And the warmth of it spread in a soft, guilty bloom.

The glass kissed by the fog of his breath was slowly clearing. The shape across the street had gone still again, swallowed back into curtains and shadows. But the residue remained. That movement- brief, thoughtless- had disturbed something in him.

He stayed like that for a moment longer, pulse thudding steadily in his throat. Then slowly, very slowly, he lowered his hand from the glass. It felt foreign now, tingling and tacky against his side like it had touched something *unholy* .

He turned.

The flat behind him was quiet. Clean. Lived-in.

Still.

The kettle was off. The sink was dry. The photo frame by the bookshelf still leaned askew, hiding the smile he couldn't bear to look at anymore. James crossed back into the kitchen on quiet feet, as if any sound might shatter the illusion of peace he'd constructed board by board, smile by smile. Otto had returned to his perch on the counter, tail curled neatly around his paws, eyes like polished coins, glinting.

James reached for his tea.The cup was warm, but not hot. Like him- faintly alive, barely burning. He took a sip, letting the bitterness coat his tongue. He didn't grimace. He welcomed it.

Then he looked down at Otto, who tilted his head just slightly, the way cats do when they're reading something you'll never be able to hide. The silence stretched, long and elastic. Almost elegant. His lips parted around a breath he didn't know he was holding. He felt his

expression change, bit by bit. The tight pull of muscle around his mouth, the soft tremble of his cheek, the slight twitch at the corner of his eye.

A smile.

It arrived like a betrayal. It felt *wrong* - not untrue, but *disloyal* . The kind of expression that meant everything you wanted had already died, but you'd learned to live in the mausoleum.

It felt like a crack forming in polished marble.

His guilt rose in his chest again- not as a stab, but as a slow, thick tide. A spill of tar in the lungs. Viscous. Familiar. Something he'd paved the floors of his mind with. Built foundations out of. He looked down at Otto. Still staring. Still waiting.

James let out a slow breath through his nose, and finally, *finally* , spoke.

"The view from here's not so bad, is it?"

He glanced toward the window again. Toward the stranger, the silhouette, the hunger that slept but had awoken wearing his skin. James's fingers dug gently beneath Otto's chin, the soft scrape a quiet promise whispered in the stillness.

"We've got a new friend."

Chapter End Notes

I would usually put analysis here, but honestly I'm quite curious as to what the readers think. So, for now, analysis is for you to have a little crack at.

Because I want to dedicate this last end note to something different and more raw. This journey has been incredible. I've dedicated so much time to this piece of work and I've been reading books and other people's writing on here and subconsciously merging my favourite styles together to form my unique writing style- and I've loved every second.

Tapping into childhood trauma and such a patchy relationship has been not only intriguing, but it's also allowed me to experiment with my writing even more.

A little bit about me:

I am a University student studying creative writing. Not just stories, no, but that is an umbrella term which holds lots of different forms of writing. However writing stories has always been my favourite, and through writing these sorts of works where the bases of characters are already sorted for me (and I just add personality and my own flair) I've had the inspiration to use The View From Here as a template for my own novel.

It takes a while to write a novel. A real one, to a publishable standard. But I'm saying this because if I use this story as a template, it will, one day, be removed from AO3. This will not take place soon. It might even take up to 2 years- but this is simply a warning. If you really liked this, feel free to download it and it's existence can be our little secret.

Thank you for the endless support. All of the comments make me so unbelievably happy- please do leave your thoughts down below for me to read. I'll reply to you all, darlings.

Let me know a few of your favourite lines perhaps, or a few of your favourite moments.

Of course, I'll never stop writing. Keep an eye on my profile and there might be a lovely sparkly new piece of writing for you to read at some point. Also, self-promoting (eek!) but why not try one of my other pieces?

A Whisper Among Such Weary Nights shares a similar vibe to this. Raw, gritty, angsty.

Out of Touch is also angsty. Slow burn, but with a different, more lighthearted vibe which can be universally enjoyed if this isn't your sort of thing. 'Too deep' or 'too dark' or whatever. But I suppose you wouldn't have read this far if this vibe didn't appease you.

Thank you all. I look forward to reading your responses.

Have a good one :)

- docsxconverse

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!